As the controversy surrounding the role of Louis Farrakhan in the Million Man March underscored once again, the greatest story of unrequited love in American political life may be the relationship between blacks and Jews.

When the civil-rights revolution broke out in the late 1950s and early 60s, the front-line troops in the Montgomery bus boycott and then in the lunch-counter sit-ins were all blacks, but among the whites who soon rallied to the cause, a large share—a disproportionate share—were Jews. The Freedom Riders rode in integrated detachments; among the whites, Murray Friedman notes in his recent book, What Went Wrong?: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance, two-thirds were Jews. A few years later came the “Mississippi Summer,” a project dreamed up and organized by a Jew, Allard Lowenstein; according to Friedman’s estimate, Jews made up from one-third to one-half of the white volunteers who took part. Of the three martyrs of the Mississippi Summer, two, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, were Jews; James Chaney, the local activist who shared their fate, was black.

In another new book, Blacks and Jews, Paul Berman reports that Jews contributed one-half to three-quarters of the financial support received by civil-rights groups in that era. The organizational support they provided was equally pronounced. The Leadership Conference for Civil Rights, the lobbying coalition that helped muscle all modern civil-rights legislation through Congress, was chaired by Clarence Mitchell of the NAACP, but its director was Arnold Aronson, seconded from the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council. This pattern was by no means confined to the upper echelons of the movement; all over the country, Jewish organizations assigned staffers to work on civil rights. In those days, writes Berman, “it was almost as if to be Jewish and liberal were, by definition, to fly a flag for black America.”

This was certainly true for my own family. My first visit to the nation’s capital took place in 1958, when my parents brought me from New York, at the age of eleven, to the Youth March for Integrated Schools. When the sit-ins began in 1960, my mother and I went to Harlem to join in picketing the Woolworth’s on 125th Street. All of the employees and customers were black; most of the picketers were white and, I presume, Jewish like us.

My father devoted his working career to the Jewish Labor Committee; as a matter of course, civil rights were at the top of his professional concerns. My mother’s mother, after retiring as a nurse in the

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early 1960's, trekked each week to the Harlem headquarters of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to stuff envelopes. My younger brother and I both belonged to branches of CORE—rival branches—and across our dinner table we argued passionately about the tactical differences between the two. Mine may not have been a typical Jewish family, but in its devotion to the civil-rights movement, it was not unusual.

Then, just as the struggle for civil rights achieved its cardinal victories with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, many of its black activists began to turn away from their original goal, taking up instead the cause of “black power.” The meaning of black power was never clearly defined. Its driving motive seemed to be the venting of rage over racial humiliation, a rage that the earlier civil-rights movement had insisted on subordinating to the strategy of nonviolence and sublimating in the rhetoric of Christian love.

One convenient arena for this rage was the movement's own organizations, in which the presence of whites in leading positions, and indeed at all levels, was now regarded as an intolerable affront. In a truce, CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had been on the cutting edge of the fight for integration, became racially exclusive. For a while, CORE continued to allow my grandmother to stuff envelopes, but in time she was asked not to come back.

With whites in the movement redefined as oppressors, and with so many of the whites being who they were, some of the new hostility was bound to assume an anti-Semitic tone. In 1967, at the Conference for a New Politics organized by leaders of the New Left soon after Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, the black caucus insisted on pushing through a resolution condemning “imperialist Zioni[s].” The following year, during the New York City school strike, leaflets were distributed attacking Jewish teachers as “Middle-East murderers of colored people,” and a viciously anti-Semitic poem was read over the radio by the black activist Leslie Campbell.

These developments, cutting so sharply against the fraternal grain of the civil-rights struggle, shocked the Jewish community. Perhaps they should not have done so. For as we are reminded by Murray Friedman, anti-Semitism has in fact had a long history among American blacks. In the 1920's, the “buy-black” campaign of the black-nationalist leader Marcus Garvey was explicitly targeted at Jews, and Garvey later spoke admiringly of Adolf Hitler. Malcolm X, too, was a vociferous anti-Semite in both public and in private. In one meeting with representatives of the Ku Klux Klan, at which he solicited their support for his project of black separatism, Malcolm “assured them,” writes Friedman, that “it was Jews who were behind the integration movement.”

“Georgia has the Negro and Harlem has the Jew.” Thus did the black writer James Baldwin acknowledge in Commentary in February 1948 how widespread anti-Semitism was in his community. In time, Baldwin would demonstrate that he, too, was not above indulging in a little of the practice, as when he wrote that while Christians make up America's true power structure, the Jew “is doing their dirty work.” Baldwin went on to denigrate Jewish financial support of civil-rights organizations as mere “conscience money,” and to complain bitterly that the Harlem and Watts riots of the mid-1960's were not treated on the same high moral plane as the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943.

Still, Garvey and Malcolm were marginal figures in their time (although Malcolm has loomed larger in death), and Baldwin's tortured formulations, like the outbursts that punctuated the New York City teachers' strike, seem rather tame today in light of the efflorescence of black anti-Semitism in the past decade.

From Jesse Jackson's “Hymietown” remarks, to the rantings of Leonard Jeffries of the City University of New York, to, finally, Louis Farrakhan, the anti-Semitic virus has crept closer and closer to the center of black consciousness. Signposts along the way include the three-day anti-Semitic rampage in 1991 in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn; the rise in open expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment in black popular culture, as in the lyrics of the “rap artists” Public Enemy and Professor Griff and the characters drawn by the filmmaker Spike Lee; propagation of the malicious and utterly false notion that Jews played a prominent role in the slave trade; and opinion polls showing anti-Semitism on the rise among blacks—especially young and better-educated blacks—even as white anti-Semitism has declined.

Farrakhan, heir to Malcolm X (and also thought by many to be the man behind his murder), has notoriously called Judaism a “gutter religion,” and described Hitler as “wickedly great.” His lieutenant, Khalid Abdul Muhammed, has gone him one better, suggesting that the Jews deserved what the Nazis did:
Everybody always talk about Hitler exterminating six million Jews. But don’t nobody ever ask what they do to Hitler. . . . They went in there, in Germany, the way they do everywhere they go, and they supplant, they usurped. . . . They had undermined the very fabric of the society.

Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam is a small organization, but even before the Million Man March, it was all too clear that his voice resonated in the black community. In 1984, a full 65 percent of Jesse Jackson’s delegates to the Democratic convention said they held a favorable opinion of Farrakhan. In 1988, members of the Congressional Black Caucus gave a standing ovation to Farrakhan when he appeared at their annual convention. When, in 1992, the Nation of Islam published The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews—a tract that in the brazenness of its lies and the virulence of its anti-Semitism rivals The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, itself now also distributed by Farrakhan’s group—the black scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., lamented that “it may well be one of the most influential books published in the black community in the last twelve months.” And in 1994, when the NAACP under its then-chairman, Benjamin Chavis, insisted on holding a “black-leadership summit” with Farrakhan, it defended the meeting on the grounds of Farrakhan’s prestige in the community. After the Million Man March, it is hardly possible to deny that he touches some deep vein in black America.

Not surprisingly, the deterioration of relations between blacks and Jews has caused much anguish—at least among Jews. One expression of that anguish is a burgeoning literature on the topic, with some attempting to patch things up, as in Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin,* a recently published and quite ludicrous “dialogue” between Michael Lerner, the editor of Tikkun, and the black scholar Cornel West of Harvard, a prominent organizer of Farrakhan’s Million Man March. Sharing the mystical tongue of Marxism and bonded by a common hatred for America, these two soaring Peter Pans of the 1960’s Left look down upon the conflicts between their peoples as so much evidence of false consciousness.

The two books mentioned earlier are more down-to-earth, striving to analyze the problem and its history with some dispassion. Murray Friedman’s What Went Wrong? is perhaps the most informative and richly detailed history we have of black-Jewish relations in America. It is also a kind of lamentation, one which bends over backward to be fair by rehearsing a lengthy catalogue of both the good done and the sins committed by each group. As for Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments, edited by Paul Berman, this is an anthology of writings by black and Jewish authors over the past 30 years. It offers such now-famous essays as Norman Podhoretz’s “My Negro Problem—and Ours” as well as more contemporary reflections, including by Gates, Shelby Steele, Cynthia Ozick, and others.

With these books in hand, one is tempted to wade into the historical thicket oneself and ask: what, then, accounts for the deepening rift between the two groups—or, to be more precise and more honest about it, what accounts for black anti-Semitism? Why did it reemerge in the very midst of the civil-rights struggle, whose ethos of reconciliation it violated spectacularly? Why has it continued to flourish?

Perhaps the least satisfactory answer to these questions is offered by Berman in his own contribution to Blacks and Jews. In an argument reminiscent of the tortured efforts by cold-war doves to balance every Soviet misdeed with a parallel misdeed by the United States, Berman writes that the most recent eruption of black-Jewish tensions is part of a general “downhill slide” from liberalism in which both groups have participated more or less equally. While blacks have their Khalid Mohammads who defend Hitler’s policy of exterminating the Jews, an equivalent though “not exactly parallel” phenomenon exists among Jews: namely, neoconservatism! Black-Jewish amity, in this reading, collapsed under the combined weight of black apologists for Nazism and Jewish apologists for Reaganism. Here, Berman has abandoned entirely the realm of analysis for the easy temptation of taking cheap shots against old enemies.

A more traditional explanation for the rift, offered by James Baldwin among others, is essentially economic in character: blacks have resented the Jewish shopkeepers and landlords in their midst (“bloodsuckers,” in Farrakhan’s lovely phrase). But few shopkeepers, and not many landlords, grew rich off the ghetto in the past, and fewer still returned after they were burned out in the urban riots of the 1960’s. In the ensuing 30 years, the disappearance of such figures should presumably have led to a diminution in anti-Semitism—assuming the Jewish presence was its root cause. Instead, it has increased.

Still another “explanation” is proffered here by
the black historian Clayborne Carson of Stanford, who lays the blame for black anti-Semitism at the feet of Jewish organizations—which, he says, are “overbearing in their insistence that black leaders publicly repudiate isolated expressions of anti-Semitism over which the leaders had no control.” This strange inversion—making the Jewish reaction to black anti-Semitism its cause—is repeated by the left-wing black intellectual Derek Bell (formerly of Harvard Law School), who complains that “no other group’s leaders are called upon to repudiate and condemn individuals in their groups who do or say outrageous things.” But this is truly a damning admission: what other groups’ leaders would need such prodding?

As is common knowledge, those expressions of anti-Semitism that black leaders have been called upon to denounce have come not from “individuals” within the black community but from black leaders and intellectual spokesmen themselves. Certainly, if the head of a Jewish organization made outright anti-black statements, other Jewish leaders would hasten to condemn him. They would do this not only because it would be politic, but because they would be outraged. In contrast, one senses that the real reason Carson and Bell and the black leaders they defend have not denounced Farrakhan, and resent being asked to do so, is that they are not genuinely offended by the hatred so apparent in his remarks.

From Bell, for instance, we get insipid euphemisms (“Even those who strongly disagree with some of [Farrakhan’s] positions must ask whether the negatives justify total condemnation”), while from Cornel West have come outright rationalizations (Farrakhan, according to West, has spoken positively of Hitler “because he wanted to talk about somebody who created a people out of nothing”). With statements like these, it is hardly surprising that neither West nor Carson nor Bell can offer us any larger understanding of black anti-Semitism and its roots; to varying degrees they are enmeshed in it.

One man to whom we can look for a frank accounting is Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who has had the courage to denounce black anti-Semitism in an unwavering voice. According to Gates, anti-Semitism has become “a weapon in the raging battle of who will speak for black America.” Within any politically engaged group, he argues, tactical advantage often accrues to the faction that assumes the role of the greatest militancy and obduracy; Farrakhan has demonstrated the validity of this proposition, and his anti-Semitism is part of that posture. By successfully staking out the most radical political turf, he has thrown more moderate black leaders off-guard. Even those who have not been drawn in must worry that they will be split off from the increasingly radicalized mainstream. (As if to illustrate Gates’s point, the NAACP and other groups that had remained aloof from the Million Man March rushed to endorse the “black-leadership summit” announced by Farrakhan and his partner, Ben Chavis, immediately after the event.)

Gates’s interpretation of the tactical utility of anti-Semitism is persuasive, but it is only the beginning of an answer. Black anti-Semitism has its source not at the level of political tactics but at a far deeper place in the psyche. Julius Lester, a black writer who has converted to Judaism, has attempted to plumb this region. Blacks, he writes perceptively in this volume, achieve a much greater sense of power when they direct their wrath at Jews rather than at whites generically. For white Americans are in some basic sense invulnerable to anti-white prejudice on the part of blacks. “Honky” may be a linguistic or even a moral analogue to “nigger,” but it lacks the same power to insult and to offend, a power that would be vividly on display when the Fuhrman tapes were played before the jury in the O.J. Simpson case. Jews, however, for all their success in America, and unlike Gentile white Americans, feel anything but invulnerable, and harsh words directed at them leave real wounds. Hence the appeal.

One might build upon Lester’s argument. No doubt because they have been America’s most visible and abused minority, blacks see the world more in racial terms than do whites. With humiliations and insults still an undeniable part of daily life, if much less so than in yesteryear, many blacks may well regard the American ethos of color-blindness as mere hypocrisy. Thus, it is easy to suppose that prejudices based on racial or ethnic distinctions, including those borrowed from whites, may live on among blacks with great intensity. The novelist Richard Wright, quoted by Murray Friedman, offers a trenchant illustration of this point: “All of us black people hated Jews... because we had been taught... that Jews were ‘Christ Killers.’”

Among the sources of contemporary black anti-Semitism, envy also surely occupies a significant place. In Berman’s Blacks and Jews, the black newspaper columnist Joe Wood writes poignantly: “We loved and hated Jews like a second child does the first.” This love/hate relation has found its ulti-
mate expression in the far reaches of Afrocentrism, with the claim that blacks are the actual, real Jews, and that they who call themselves Jews are impostors.

Wood's observation may also, perhaps inadvertently, contain an equally telling insight into the behavior of American Jews. Did not many Jewish participants in the civil-rights movement love the blacks as a first child does the second, basking in their role of benefactor and protector, and unwittingly inviting the resentment that is ever directed at the self-conscious doer of good deeds?

But there is another point to be made in this connection. Envy is a powerful emotion, and certainly, when it comes to the Jews, blacks have much to be envious of. Measured by the standard of material or professional accomplishment, Jews are one of the most successful minorities in America, blacks one of the least. To compound matters, though blacks have suffered far more prejudice and discrimination, Jews too have had to overcome barriers never faced by Gentile whites in America. Yet, on average, Jews are much better off than white Gentiles. The success of the Jews forces a recognition, a painful and bitterly resisted recognition, that prejudice and discrimination are obstacles that can be overcome, and that there is no automatic correspondence between how a group is treated and how it fares.

In an essay in the Berman volume, Leon Wieseltier observes that in renouncing discrimination, America has "dared both [blacks and Jews] to take yes for an answer." Jews have leaped at the chance. Many blacks have hung back, apparently fearing that to accept the dare is to relinquish an excuse for failure. Instead, they have struck a Faustian bargain with affirmative action. The bargain has yielded them some material gains and some "role models," but at the cost of planting the inescapable suggestion that they are unable to compete on their own.

It is the black devotion to affirmative action in its current form that renders meaningless all the talk of rebuilding a black-Jewish alliance. To be cold about it, Jews and blacks today have very few interests in common. It is true that many Jews have historically taken positions inimical to Jewish interests, narrowly conceived, for example by supporting redistributionist economics, dovish foreign policies, and leniency to criminals. But if Jews have been able to disregard some narrow interests, one would like to think that they cannot disregard a broader, deeper one.

Jews have flourished in America as nowhere else in the Diaspora because it is the most meritocratic society in which they have ever had the good fortune to dwell. The principle of equal treatment has liberated Jews from both the injury and the insult of disabilities that were imposed on them for centuries. In that sense, equal treatment constitutes an "interest" of theirs. It is also, however, a matter of transcendent ethical import. It was under the banner of this idea that Jews flocked to the civil-rights movement, and the same idea constituted the only real basis of the black-Jewish alliance that once existed. For Jews eager to restore that alliance, the asking price today is nothing less than that they renounce the principle of equal treatment.

Still, there does remain one powerful Jewish interest congruent with the interests of blacks, and that is racial harmony. Like everybody else in America, but more so, Jews have a stake in black success, for the deterioration of race relations in general is bound to hold special dangers for Jews in particular. That Jews take their responsibilities in this matter seriously is a matter of long and voluminous record. Which only makes it all the more unconscionable that within the black community, hostility to Jews, whatever its ultimate "explanation," should now enjoy a currency and a legitimacy long since faded from the rest of American society.