

## Where cultures join hands, there is strength

Share 12

Tweet 1

g+1 0

Email 1

0 COMMENTS



*Mayor Nutter lights the first candle during a Hanukkah menorah lighting at 30th Street Station. Inquirer staff*

Posted: Tuesday, February 10, 2015, 1:08 AM  
By Constance Garcia-Barrio

My emotional armor clanked into place as I entered the National Museum of American Jewish History on Independence Mall. Would the Jews here treat me, a brown-skinned woman in business casual, with respect or scorn?

A childhood incident had taught me that blacks in the United States could be considered lesser people vis-à-vis Jews, which put me on uncertain ground.

When my mother and father, a caterer with a modest business and a postal worker, respectively, told one of my teachers that they planned to put me on an academic fast track, the 60-something white Protestant teacher said, "Don't do it. There are Jewish students in that program, and your daughter won't keep up."

I held my own in school, but another factor deepened my uncertainty about blacks and Jews.

My mother worked as a domestic for Jewish clients before she started her catering business. Sometimes they treated her well, sometimes not. You stood a better chance with Jews, my father used to say over dinner, but you couldn't count on it. Where was the firm spot on this terrain?

A look at U.S. history yielded another murky picture.

Opponents sometimes threatened Jewish abolitionists like Ernestine Rose and Rabbi David Einhorn with being tarred and feathered due to their antislavery lectures. On the other hand, slaveowner and lawyer Judah P. Benjamin, the son of Sephardic Jews, held cabinet-level positions in the Confederacy.

Philadelphian Robert Purvis had still more twists in his background. Purvis' mother, Harriet Judah, of black and Jewish ancestry, had at least one slave in her native Charleston, S.C., as did some of her free colored neighbors. Yet Robert, once the family moved to Philadelphia, went on to become an ardent abolitionist. In hiding fugitives, he risked crippling fines and occasionally his life.

Where did that leave me?

For starters, I looked at the parallels between blacks and Jews. Spirituality has great importance in our lives. We've survived extreme oppression and developed a healthy paranoia as a result. I can see the similarity between the Underground Railroad that hid fugitives and members of the resistance that hid Jews during World War II.

I consider the results when we bring our combined strength to bear, as happened during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

Another example of cooperation had brought me to the museum. I had come to see "Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow," an exhibition about Jewish scholars who, fired from teaching positions by the Nazis, ended up teaching at black colleges in the South. The scholars found a home and the students gained from their knowledge.

The artifacts and video at the museum marked common ground. It also marked the beginning of healing for me. I could move toward releasing resentment, a high-maintenance emotion that drains energy and puts me in the victim role.

In this racist society, the chances are excellent that I'll run up against prejudice and discrimination from whites, including some Jews, again. I hope to have gained enough strength and done enough healing to call them on it. I can be the best ally for Jews if I approach them as an equal.

I applaud President Obama for the seders he holds at the White House, and Mayor Nutter for lighting the menorah at 30th Street Station during Hanukkah. Such reaching toward one another has become crucial. People of African descent face police brutality, a skewed criminal justice system, poor schooling, and even limited access to wholesome food. Jews here and in Europe confront anti-Semitism, some of it violent, in their daily lives. Blacks and Jews must make common cause.

During Black History Month, I'll read not only the writing of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but that of Polish-born American Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. I will do it out of self-interest, if nothing else.

A Jewish friend put it succinctly: Blacks and Jews will either stand or fall together.

Read more at

[http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/inquirer/20150210\\_Where\\_cultures\\_join\\_hands\\_\\_there\\_is\\_strength.html#eSDkxUgBGhAAbUsK.99](http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/inquirer/20150210_Where_cultures_join_hands__there_is_strength.html#eSDkxUgBGhAAbUsK.99)