Farrakhan Talks to the Jews

For three hours, over coffee
Louis Farrakhan spoke to the Jewish people through The Jerusalem Report. The anti-Semitism he repeatedly spouts was no less virulent at his dining room table, but his message "is for the Jews' own good."

VINCE BEISER Chicago

Whatever else Louis Farrakhan may be, let no one say he is not a gracious host — even to a Jewish journalist. Before beginning our interview at his palatial residence in an affluent, integrated South Chicago neighborhood, the leader of the Nation of Islam White House, he has called it. "I want you to feel at home, and ask any questions you feel your readers would be interested in," says Farrakhan, his voice as honey-smooth as a Motown singer. One reason he has become perhaps the nation's most important African-American leader is immediately obvious: The man practically glows with charisma and have publicly called for the community to take Farrakhan up on his repeated appeals for a meeting with Jewish leaders. Last year, at the urging of Jewish "60 Minutes" journalist Mike Wallace, World Jewish Congress head Edgar Bronfman hosted Farrakhan and his wife at a dinner in his New York home (although Bronfman soon cut off contact with the minister). And in April Edward Rendell, Philadelphia's Jewish mayor, invited the minister to speak at a rally to promote racial healing. Farrakhan tells me he is now talking quietly with "several members of the Jewish community."

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makes sure that my photographer and I are comfortable in our high-backed chairs at his long dining-room table, well supplied with pineapple juice and coffee, and apologizes for having made us wait, even though we actually arrived early.

The house feels peaceful, the quiet disturbed only occasionally by the muffled crackles of the walkie-talkies carried by the neatly dressed security men passing by outside. Soft light flows in from a skylight over the adjacent atrium, in the center of which a fountain surrounded by lush green plants burbles serenely. The carpets are deep and soft, the floors marble, the chandeliers crystal. The mosque-like mansion is home to Farrakhan, 64, and is also the NOI's symbolic headquarters — their black equivalent of the charm. The Honorable Minister is dressed casually today, having swapped his usual dark suit and bow tie for an off-white pants and tunic ensemble set off by a couple of hefty gold rings and a gold necklace.

Farrakhan, who always has so much to say about Jews, has agreed to speak to them directly through an interview with a Jewish publication, one of only a handful of times he has done so and the first since the Million Man March he convened in Washington in 1995 catapulted him to the forefront of black political leadership. Certainly not by coincidence, his willingness to be interviewed comes also at a time when the American Jewish community's consensus against opening a dialogue with him has begun to erode. Since the march, a handful of prominent Jews have publicly called for the community to take Farrakhan up on his repeated appeals for a meeting with Jewish leaders.

To say that Farrakhan is an anti-Semite is accurate, but inadequate. First of all, though it gets far less press, he also has plenty of ill will for gays, Catholics, whites in general and, for that matter, blacks whose conduct he disapproves of. Jews, however, occupy a special place in his pantheon of devils. In his speeches and writings, Farrakhan tirelessly promotes a range of nefarious Jewish-conspiracy theories, some borrowed, some of his own invention; in conversation, a burning sense of resentment against Jews boils easily to the surface. But Farrakhan is no Nazi. He has never espoused violence against Jews, and swears he holds no hate for any group. In fact, his feelings toward Jews are much more complicated than simple hate: Coexisting alongside his antipathy is a pro-
found admiration and respect for Jews. “Jews are leaders in every field of human endeavor,” he tells me. “Not only in this country, but in every country where Jews live. In spite of the negatives against the Jewish people, because of your cultural heritage, because of your unity, you have been able to survive even in those countries where you have been persecuted. Yes, I admire that. Any intelligent human being who is not bigoted would admire the accomplishments of the Jewish people. You are world leaders.”

In an interview with African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates published in the New Yorker last year, Farrakhan even claimed to suspect his paternal grandparents were Portuguese Jews. “I believe that in my blood,” he told Gates, “because when I was a little boy I used to love listening to the Jewish cantors in Boston.”

Farrakhan was well acquainted with Jews in his youth. He was raised by his Barbados-born mother in the working-class, heavily West Indian Boston neighborhood of lower Roxbury — right alongside heavily Jewish upper Roxbury. As a young violin student, he went on to Gates, “all my heroes were Jewish. The greatest was Jascha Heifetz, and I loved him then and I love him now.

“I’ve been leading the Nation of Islam for 20 years now, and there’s not one incident you can find of any follower of mine involved in any hate crime,” he says. (This is true, as even Farrakhan’s arch-nemesis, the Anti-Defamation League, admits.) “How is that possible if I’m such a hater? Shouldn’t there have been at least one synagogue defaced by one of my followers? Do you know why that’s not so? In the Koran, if we saw someone defacing the synagogue, it is our duty to stop them.

“I pledge this to you, and to the Jewish people,” he goes on. “I have no intention whatsoever, if I became the most powerful black man in America tomorrow, to do evil to the Jewish community. I just want to stop the evil that’s being done to mine.

Your children are sacred to you, and to me as well.”

All of this is less schizophrenic than it sounds. One of the central tenets of Farrakhan’s ideology is promoting black economic self-sufficiency and collective self-help. And as a highly intelligent man and a former professional musician, he reveres education and culture. U.S. Jews, with their vast network of communal charities, affluence, and prominence in business, academia and the arts, are a most admirable model of what Farrakhan wants the black community to become.

But Farrakhan’s admiration for Jews doesn’t necessarily make him like them. It shades easily over into envy and resentment, which in turn provide emotional fuel to drive his relentless accusations of Jewish conspiracies.

To begin with, he believes that Jews played a key part in the African slave trade, as spelled out in “The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews,” a book-length propaganda piece published by the NOI. (For the record, many scholars have debunked the theory that Jews played any role out of proportion to their tiny numbers in slave-owning or trading. In fact, in the early 1800s there were more black slave-owners than Jewish ones.)

He also buys the ever-popular notion that a Jewish cabal secretly controls the government. In 1913, Farrakhan explains, certain international bankers — “Warburg and others” — led a conspiracy to take control of the United States’ money supply by creating the Federal Reserve. “You know and I know that there’s a group of bankers that print the U.S. money,” he says. Jewish bankers? “Yes. The main ones. It’s not an accident that the heads of the Federal Reserve happen to be Jewish.” The clincher: In 1913, the same year the Federal Reserve was established, so were the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Anti-Defamation League. “Is this
Black Jewish academic Julius Lester has also pointed out that Jews make a much better target for black rage than whites in general. Plagued with a sense of relativity not felt by most whites, U.S. Jews invariably lash back full-force against any perceived anti-Semitic, thus giving their attackers a power. But Farrakhan also plainly believes in all the things he says about Jews. Although he tones down his rhetoric speaking to mainstream audiences, when asked directly he unhesitatingly repeats the accusations he has been levelled at Jews for years. He has nothing to fear. He is, after all, a prophet who has walked with the messiah himself.

Behind the Force

OUIS FARRAKHAN'S Na
tion of Islam grew out of the teachings of Wallace D. Fard, a door-to-door cloth peddler who disappeared in 1930s. Fard preached a melange of genuine Islamic beliefs intermixed with the conspiracist silly notions. Farrakhan explicitly the idea that the so-called Negro, not the white "blue-eyed devils" who oppressed them, would be the true inheritors of the earth. He attracted thousands of followers, influential, but influential and controversial. Muhammad, who founded the NOI after Fard's mysterious disappearance in 1934. The NOI is today far the largest of several groups sometimes known as "black Muslims."

Louis Eugene Walcott, then a rising calypso singer, was recruited into the NOI by Muhammad in the mid-1950s. Renamed Ministry Louis Farrakhan and training in Lagos, Nigeria, he rose quickly in the NOI hierarchy. Farrakhan fiercely de- nounced his former teacher when Malcolm left the NOI in 1964. Speculation has lingered to this day that Malcolm's split was how involved in Malcolm's assassination the following year.

With Elijah Muhammad, Farrakhan's mentor, dead in 1975, leadership of the NOI passed to his son, Wallace Deen Muhammad. With Elijah, however, quickly renounced the NOI's black supremacist doctrines and reigned as a mainstream Islamic organization dubbed the World Community of Al-Islam in the West. An NOI film called "Farrakhan" soon brought him and reestablished the Nation of Islam with himself as leader.

Since then, Farrakhan has steadily grown in prominence. Estimates of NOI followers range from 20,000 to 200,000, but its influence in black communities is waning. Farrakhan has tamed the NOI's more violent tendencies and toned down its anti-Semitism. The group has won broad respect for its work rehabilitating drug addicts, and its introduction to prison and other public service projects. In recent years, mainstream black organizations that once kept Farr­

Kahn at arm's length have become increasingly willing to embrace him. This could be the moment Farrakhan has been waiting for. He first came to prominence in 1995, when hundreds of thousands of black men gathered in Washington for the Million Man March. The march was dedicated to personal responsibility and atonement for their own transgressions, which he initiated. That stunning achievement made Farrakhan a media sensation and thrust him to the top of America's black leadership. Almost immediately, however, Farrakhan squandered much of his moment. He launched a worldwide "amnesty tour" paying chummy visits to notorious drug dealers in Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Nigeria, appalling many of his admirers. None­theless, he continues to routinely pack speaking venues, and drew tens of thousands of people into the streets of New York for last year's follow-up rally to the Million Man March. Polls consistently show large chunks of the black public supportive of him.

Recently, Farrakhan launched a bid to break into mainstream politics. The NOI has begun to push voter registration drives, and Farrakhan talks of mobilizing a "Third Force" in the political system, and has been talking to Republican leaders. He has sidelined Khalid Abdul Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and recruited into the NOI by Muhammad, his most radical mentor, and!
JEWISH WORLD

COVER STORY

INTERFAITH

HEALING?:

Farrakhan

and

Philadelphia

Mayor

Rendell

Jewish animus is his overwhelming, easily affronted pride. In our three-hour conversation, his angriest moments came not when the issue was Jews oppressing his race in the abstract, but when it was something Jews had done to him personally. At one point, I asked him about a meeting he had had with two Chicago rabbis in 1989. The rabbis had insisted he meet a number of conditions such as renouncing “The Secret Relationship” before they would continue a dialogue with him. To Farrakhan, this was a mortal insult.

He seethingly recounted the episode to me, every detail still fresh in his memory eight years later. “To approach me like that, like I’m some little boy and you the slave master and I’m your slave and I’ve been out of order,” he says, finger pounding the table, “you’ve got a hell of a nerve. No, Sir. Not with me. By the grace of God, not ever. When you talk like that to me, you make the WARRIOR in me come out. I WILL FIGHT you until death when you come like that to me!”

And Farrakhan would like Jews to share the secrets of their success. “In practically every city in which there’s a Jewish population, there’s a Jewish hospital. There’s not a black hospital,” he says. “How have you been able in certain cities to capture part of the market in clothing, food, shelter? Black people are weak in those areas. This puts us in a position to have our weakness exploited, when you could be the teachers to help us come up out of this weakened condition.”

This idea apparently appealed to Edgar Bronfman when the two met; reportedly, there was talk of Bronfman putting up funds to launch a black-run hotel in Washing-

ington, D.C. But days later, after Farrakhan made a speech comparing the suffering of Iraqis under international sanctions to the Holocaust, Bronfman cut off his contact with Farrakhan and rejoined the ranks of Jewish leaders who insist Farrakhan is an inveterate anti-Semite who must not be granted recognition.

Farrakhan, however, can no longer be easily sidelined. He is today perhaps the most powerful black leader in America, and is working to break into mainstream politics. Ironically, the anti-Semitism with which Farrakhan has become virtually synonymous is now hurting his political career at least as much as it is the Jewish community. While many politicians would love to tap Farrakhan’s base of support, his extremism keeps most from embracing him. “He rode the headlines as long as he could, but now the Jewish issue is working against him,” says Magida. “He’s trying to enter the mainstream, and finding major roadblocks labeled J-E-W.”

American Jews have so far come up with only two responses to Farrakhan: work to isolate him, or sit down and talk with him. Neither is particularly attractive. Harping on his extremism is the easiest way for Jews to help contain his influence. But constantly attacking Farrakhan only keeps him in the news, strengthens him with his supporters, and makes Jews look intransigent and spiteful even to blacks who don’t support him. The whole issue is damaging the already strained ties between the communities.

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