

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."

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-

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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



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 the wisdom of God through his prophets through the Children of Israel, 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

THE HONORABLE MINISTER: 'I criticize you . . . to put you back in favor with God'

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

It's NOT AN accident that the heads of the the FEDERAL RESERVE happen to be JEWISH'

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

an accident?" he asks meaningfully. "Who owns the big companies that manufacture arms?" he continues. "You look deep enough, you'll find some of the bankers." Certain nefarious Jewish bankers even helped finance Hitler, he says.

Turns out that Jews' historic support for black groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is really just a tactic to keep blacks down. "Why must Jews attempt to control organizations that are supposed to be for our advancement?" asks Farrakhan. "You were interested in black social mobility, but right in the founding of it, economics was written out of it."

Of course, Jews control the media. Last March, he told CNN that Jews "meet once a year or so in Hollywood or in Park Avenue to look at the trends of America and the world. And if there are trends they do not like, then they write scripts, they write movies, they write books. They do things to influence the trends. And that is why I intend to stay on this path until there's some change made. Black people are going to be free of Jewish control."

WHEN PRESSED, FARRAKHAN says that all of this devilry is perpetrated only by Jewish leaders, not all Jews. But it's clear he thinks all Jews share responsibility. Several times, when talking about the iniquities of "you people," he would literally point an accusing finger at me.

When he really gets worked up, his verbal brush grows suspiciously broad. He is furious about the ADL's successful recent efforts to ban NOI-affiliated security companies from working in public housing projects (for proselytizing and unfair hiring practices), despite their generally excellent record in reducing crime. That proves, says Farrakhan, "you don't care nothing about black suffering . . . about murder and violence in those places . . . You're very selfish, self-centered, and what you give to others is really, if you look underneath it all, to benefit yourself." His sunshine smile gone, replaced by a baleful scowl, he goes on: "A very vindictive people you are, very unforgiving, and

very vengeful . . . You make people bow down and crawl, day after day after day, and it's always too little, too late. Suppose God used that same yardstick on your own transgressions. How many of you would be able to stand?"

In fact, God is so appalled by Jews' wickedness that blacks have superseded them as His chosen people. "How in the world could God continue to choose you, over your violation of the agreement? Somebody else is given a chance now," says Farrakhan. "God has chosen us."

These tidings were revealed in the 1930s by itinerant silk peddler Wallace D. Fard, who the NOI now calls Farrad Muhammad and an incarnation of God (see box). Fard's chief minister, Elijah Muhammad, concretized Fard's movement into today's NOI. Elijah Muhammad, Farrakhan now believes, was nothing less than "that one foretold in the Gospel and the Torah": the messiah himself.

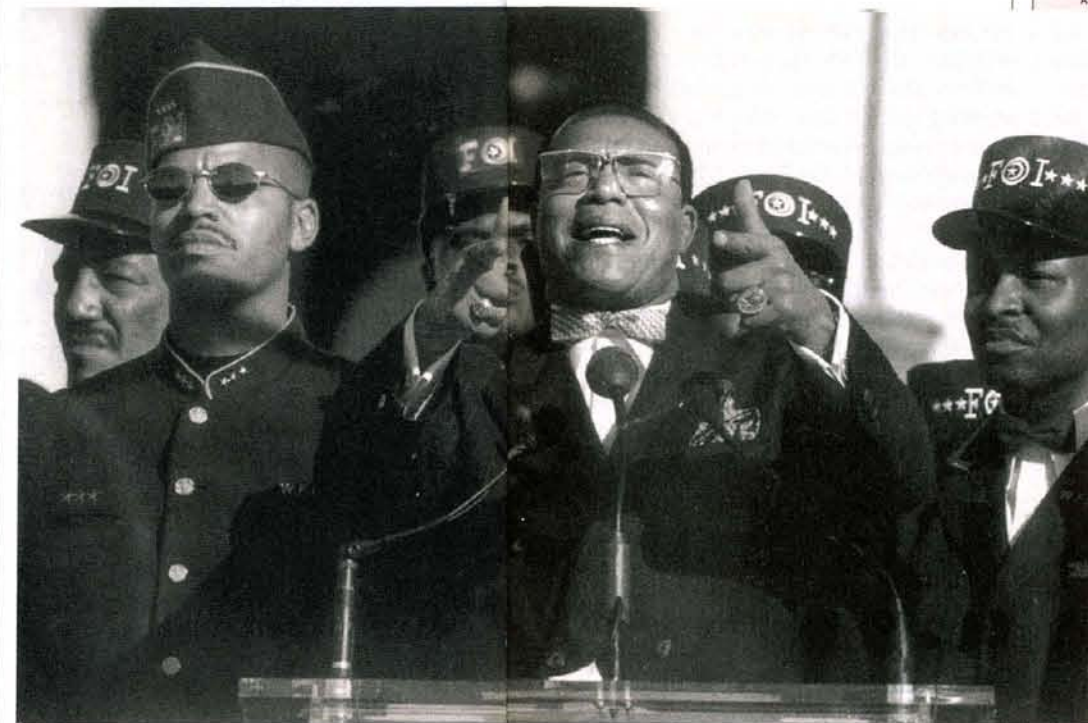
No wonder Jews have failed to keep Farrakhan's influence from growing. "Nothing you have done has been able to ill affect my rise, and nothing you do will be able to ill affect my rise. And if you want to have a showdown, and you call on your God that you think is the holy one of Israel, and let me call on mine, I'll show you where the real God is."

Why does Farrakhan say these things? On one level, it's clear his anti-Jewish fillades serve him politically. Until 1984, he was the relatively obscure leader of a small black sect. But that year, with the media paying attention, thanks to his involvement with Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign, Farrakhan's remarks calling Hitler "wickedly great" and Judaism a "dirty religion" catapulted him into the headlines. (The remark about Hitler is one of the few used unfairly against Farrakhan. As Gates notes, "It's clear, in context, that Farrakhan meant 'great' in the same spirit in which Time magazine named Hitler Man of the Year for 1938.")

"Suddenly, he was able to fill Madison Square Garden," observes black Chicago Tribune columnist Clarence Page. "Obviously, he got the message. This was the way to cut himself out from the herd."

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 vulnerability not felt by most whites, U.S. Jews invariably lash back full-force against any perceived anti-Semite, thus giving their attackers a sense of power.

But Farrakhan also plainly believes 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 leveling at Jews for years. He has nothing to fear. He is, after all, a prophet who has walked with the messiah himself.



Elijah Muhammad, however, was never as fixated on Jews as Farrakhan. Which raises the question of where Farrakhan's attitudes come from. A strain of anti-Semitism does run through African-American history. Arthur Magida, author of a recently published Farrakhan biography, traces its roots to crude stereotypes of Jews as miserly Christ-killers passed on to black slaves by their Christian owners. Several black nationalist leaders, including Marcus Garvey and Farrakhan's NOI mentors, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, also fulminated against Jewish slumlords and exploitative merchants.

The aftermath of the civil rights movement, the most celebrated example of black-Jewish cooperation, ironically also gave rise to anti-Jewish feelings. Where

blacks and Jews were once both outcast victims of discrimination, Jews have since gone on to flourish in mainstream America while things have only worsened for many African-Americans. Today, Jews are wildly over-represented in America's leading universities, law firms, businesses, and in government and the media. Almost 90 percent of college-age Jews are enrolled in higher education. Per capita Jewish income is almost double that of non-Jews. But one-third of blacks live in poverty. One-third of young black men are in jail or on parole. Half the black men between ages 24 and 35 lack full-time jobs. It's not hard to understand how easily demagogues can channel the re-

sentment this breeds into anti-Semitism. Magida notes that Farrakhan's mother used to clean houses for wealthy Jews when he was a child. Farrakhan gave a hint at the bitterness he has stored over that humiliation in a speech years later, saying: "We left our homes uncleaned, yet cleaned yours. We left our children unkempt to clean yours."

Though it gets far less attention than his attacks on Jews, Farrakhan spends much of his time castigating blacks for drug abuse, crime and other evils they inflict on their own communities. His calls for blacks to take on responsibility are a large part of his appeal. But that message

MEDIA HIT: Farrakhan's career peaked with the Million Man March

Behind the Force

LOUIS FARRAKHAN'S Nation of Islam grew out of the teachings of Wallace D. Fard, a door-to-door cloth salesman in Detroit in the 1930s. Fard preached a melange of genuine Islamic beliefs mixed with his own innovations, especially the idea that the "so-called Negroes," not the white "blue-eyed devils" who oppressed them, would be the true inheritors of the earth. He attracted thousands of followers, including his star acolyte, Elijah Muhammad, who founded the NOI after Fard's mysterious disappearance in 1934. The NOI is today by 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 and his protégé, Malcolm X, in the mid-1950s. Renamed Minister Louis Farrakhan and trained personally by Malcolm, he rose quickly in the NOI hierarchy. Farrakhan fiercely denounced his former teacher when Malcolm left the NOI in 1964. Speculation has lingered to this day that Farrakhan was somehow involved in Malcolm's assassination the following year.

With Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, leadership of the NOI passed to his son, Wallace Dean Muhammad. The younger Muhammad, however, quickly renounced the NOI's black supremacist doctrines and recreated it as a mainstream Islamic organization dubbed the World Community of al-Islam in the West. An outraged Farrakhan soon broke with 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 goes far beyond its card-carrying membership. The group has won broad respect for its work rehabilitating drug addicts and criminals, and providing security services in dangerous housing

projects. In recent years, mainstream black organizations that once kept Farrakhan at arm's length have become increasingly willing to embrace him.

The peak of Farrakhan's career so far came in spring 1995, when hundreds of thousands of black men gathered in Washington for the Million Man March 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 fore of America's black leadership.

Almost immediately, however, Farrakhan squandered much of his momentum with a worldwide "friendship" tour paying chummy visits to notorious dictators 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 approve of him.

Recently, Farrakhan launched a bid to break into mainstream politics. The NOI has begun to push voter registration. Farrakhan talks of mobilizing a "Third Force" in the political system, and has endorsed a few candidates for local office. He has sidelined Khalid Abdul Muhammad, his most radical minister, and elevated former NAACP head Ben Chavis, who is known as a bridge-builder to Jews and other groups.

These efforts have begun bearing small fruits. Republican vice presidential candidate Jack Kemp praised Farrakhan's economic self-help philosophy last year. Jude Wanniski, an eccentric but influential right-wing academic, has been pushing the Republican party to work with Farrakhan, and brought him to speak at a Florida retreat for financial and political nabobs last March. And in April, Philadelphia's Jewish mayor invited the minister to speak at a rally for racial healing. Whether or not his bid for mainstream acceptance succeeds, Farrakhan will clearly remain a major force in the black community — and America — for years to come. □

Vince Beiser

is easier to accept, perhaps, when coupled with the idea that someone else is contributing to their self-destruction. Farrakhan loathes the popularity of gangsta rap, for instance. But he blames both the rappers and the companies like Time-Warner that distribute the records. "Yes, we're in a savage condition. It's our fault. But your people are the ones distributing this."

One wellspring of Farrakhan's anti-

to believe it. At the end of our interview, after everything he has said about how arrogant and vindictive my people are, he tells me with the utmost sincerity: "I want you to know I meant no disrespect of you."

His criticisms, he insists, are simply truths that he must tell. "I'm not criticizing Jewish people out of a wicked motivation, to see Jewish people killed," he says, "but I'm criticizing what I believe Jews are

guilty of in their relationship with black people so that that action that is not good can be stopped and replaced with a better action." It's also for the Jews' own good: "If I criticize you for something that you're doing that ill affects justice, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that's to put you

back in favor with God."

Over and over, at the Million Man March, at his appearance with Mayor Rendell and in our interview, Farrakhan calls for dialogue with Jewish leaders. The first item on the agenda would be to discuss the things he says that have upset Jews and try to resolve the controversy.

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.



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!"

But through it all, Farrakhan swears he is not anti-Semitic — and actually seems

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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 Wash-

ington, D.C. But talking with him would bolster his claims to mainstream acceptability. Moreover, it is unlikely to change his views. How can you change the mind of someone who has spoken with the messiah?

Perhaps part of the answer is to recognize that there is much more to the Farrakhan phenomenon than just what he says about Jews. He wins much of his support not because of his hatred, but because of the positive things he does in black communities blasted by poverty, crime, drugs and hopelessness. Jews might have more success at limiting his influence by working to improve the conditions that give rise to leaders like him. □