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## ANTISEMITISM OMITTED: FAILINGS IN MEDIA FRAMING OF THE CROWN HEIGHTS RIOTS

Josef Brock

National and local news media outlets framed the Crown Heights Riots inaccurately as a racial conflict between Black locals and Lubavitch Jewish residents. Media reporting lacked the nuance of Jewish racial classification, misidentified the Lubavitchers as archetypical American whites, and failed to illustrate the overtones of Black antisemitic motivation during the riots.

On Monday evening, August 19, 1991, a police-led, three car motorcade escorted Rebbe Menachem Schneerson— Grand Rebbe of the Lubavitch Hasidic community. The second car carried the Rebbe while Yosef Lifsch and two friends, all three Lubavitchers, followed in the last car. At about 8:20 p.m. the first two cars drove through an intersection without incident. Lifsch, in what is believed to be an attempt to keep up, followed through the intersection, as the light turned red, and collided with a car driving perpendicularly. Lifsch's car veered out of control, jumped the sidewalk, and struck two young Black children— seven-year-old cousins Gavin and Angela Cato— resulting in the death of Gavin. Witness and expert accounts differ on Lifsch's driving speed. While a number of witnesses reported that Lifsch passed through a red light, Lifsch, and his two driving mates, maintain that the light was yellow. Immediately after striking the children, a crowd gathered at the scene. Lifsch attempted to help others free the children who were pinned beneath the car, but was attacked by the crowd. Four nights and three days of riots followed this fatal car accident. Immediately after the incident, a rumor began to spread that involved Hatzalah, a volunteer emergency medical service that serves Jewish communities. It was alleged that the Hatzalah arrived at the scene before city ambulances and treated Lifsch, but not the children he struck – this rumor is believed to be a catalyst for

the riots. The rumor was later dispelled, but not before rioters used it to justify claiming the life of an entirely uninvolved Lubavitch man, Yankel Rosenbaum, and violently attacking the Lubavitch community.<sup>1</sup>

After Lifsch struck Cato, a Jewish man present at the scene of the accident was advised by the police to urge other Jews present to leave because the police could not “guarantee the safety of the Jews in the area.”<sup>2</sup> The police were right in their assessment. For the next three days, groups of roving Black rioters harassed and assaulted members of the Jewish community.<sup>3</sup> The groups threw rocks through the windows of homes belonging to Jews, some of which were occupied with children.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, according to 911 recorded calls, a group of Black rioters beat a woman and attacked another woman with three children before attempting to enter her home.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, one panicked 911 caller reported that “all the Jews that come down the block” are being pulled from their cars and beat up by an “army of people.”<sup>6</sup> In another incident, a group of fifty Black rioters with bricks and stones attacked a father and his young son— hitting the father's head with a brick before attacking the son.<sup>7</sup> In separate incidents, a group of approximately fifteen Black males surrounded and kicked a Jewish man while chanting “Jews get out of here,” while another Jewish man was beaten and robbed.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, protesters burned a makeshift Israeli flag.<sup>9</sup> Black rioters also expressed violence verbally by chanting antisemitic epithets. For example, the day after Lifsch fatally struck Cato, a group of Black rioters marched through the neighborhood of Crown Heights shouting, “death to Jews.”<sup>10</sup> Later that day, Black youths in the area chanted “heil Hitler” and “kill the Jews.”<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the riots, local and national media outlets described the events as a “racially fueled emotional fire,”

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a “plague of racial hatred,” “racial melee,” “racial tension,” “racial anger,” “race strife,” and a “racial clash.”<sup>12</sup> Of the sixteen articles published in the *Times* over the five days following the fatal car accident, the word ‘antisemitic’ came up once, not as a description of the events, but as a quote from a Lubavitcher.<sup>13</sup> In news footage from the same period, antisemitism was only mentioned once, again, spoken by another Lubavitcher.<sup>14</sup> According to one expert on media affairs, “framing entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.”<sup>15</sup> In her article, “Crown Heights: Politics and Press Coverage of the Race War That Wasn’t,” Carol B. Conaway states that when journalists use frames, they are suggesting to their audience “which elements of previously acquired knowledge are relevant to understanding the information that the journalist is imparting.”<sup>16</sup> Conaway argues that by framing the Crown Heights events as a race strife journalists invited audiences to recall the “familiar array of antagonists and issues that have characterized racial confrontations in this country.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the schemas of whites acting against Black people through racism, prejudice and discrimination, Black people marching for civil rights, or, conversely, Black people committing crimes. However, these schemas failed to mirror the incidents in Crown Heights. Ari L. Goldman, who reported for the *Times*

directly from the riots in Crown Heights, writes that “over those three days” of the riots, he saw “journalism go terribly wrong.”<sup>18</sup> According to Goldman, “the city’s newspapers, so dedicated to telling both sides of the story in the name of objectivity and balance, often missed what was really going on.”<sup>19</sup> Goldman adds that “journalists initially framed the story as a ‘racial’ conflict and failed to see the anti-Semitism inherent in the riots.”<sup>20</sup> For example, the *Times* reported that after Lifsch struck Cato, hundreds of Black rioters shouting “Jew! Jew!” ran through the streets while some threw rocks at the homes of Jews.<sup>21</sup> Paradoxically, in the same article, the *Times* reported that Rosenbaum was stabbed amidst “racial melee.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Goldman disputes the notion of a clash, stating that, “in all my reporting during the riots I never saw — or heard of — any violence by Jews against blacks.”<sup>23</sup> “But” he concludes, “the *Times* was dedicated to this version of events: blacks and Jews clashing amid racial tensions.”<sup>24</sup> The media misrepresented the overarching nature of the riots by not including that rioters were, to an extensive degree, motivated by antisemitism.

The racial framing of the Crown Heights riots is called into question because it asserts that Jews, as a whole, fulfill the definition of a race. In his book, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American identity*, Eric L. Goldstein writes that late nineteenth century American scholars and scientists attempted to “make sense of the multiple and shifting definitions of ‘race’ and to restore the sense of certainty provided by a clear, hierarchical racial system based on color.”<sup>25</sup> Goldstein provides the example of William Z. Ripley, a Harvard professor whose book, *Races of Europe* (1899), was “the most influential American work on race during the early years of the century.”<sup>26</sup> Ripley struggled to racially classify Jews since they are not associated with one geographical region and have diverse physical attributes.<sup>27</sup> In a chapter titled “Jews and Semites,” Ripley details the outcome of



Artwork provided by Sam Griffin.

various tests conducted on the physical features of Jews from a range of geographical regions.<sup>28</sup> As a result of these tests, Ripley concludes that Jews have “unconsciously taken on to a large extent the physical traits of the people among whom their lot has been thrown” and while there are some physical traits common among many Jews, such as nose and hair color, “the Jews are not a race but a people after all.”<sup>29</sup> Historically, scientists had difficulty classifying Jews as a race based on physical attributes, but viewed sociologically, Jews found comfort in identifying as a race.

As a result of white Americans trying to fit Jews into the prevalent racial divide, Jews grappled with their racial self-definition. Goldstein argues that Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, who had “long been confined to the social margins of societies,” came to see “apartness” as one of the most important aspects of Jewish identity.<sup>30</sup> Consequently,

in the American context, Jews translated this apartness into identifying as a distinct race, a term that Goldstein writes “captured their strong emotional connection to Jewish peoplehood.”<sup>31</sup> However, Goldstein points out that “as Jews came under increasing scrutiny in American racial discourse . . . they were often torn between their commitment to Jewish racial identity and their desire to be seen as stable members of white society.”<sup>32</sup> While there is no consensus on this complex self-identification struggle, some practical minded Jews, hoping to gain civil rights protection, sued to be legally classified as a race.

The first significant time American Jews sued for racial recognition under American law came in 1987 after vandals defaced a synagogue in Maryland with swastikas.<sup>33</sup> The congregation sued for civil rights protection, but were denied in the lower courts on the grounds that Jews did not constitute a race and were therefore ineligible for laws that aimed to protect non-whites.<sup>34</sup> However, on appeal, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Jews since Congress considered Jews a race in the nineteenth century when they passed the particular civil rights law the congregation was suing for.<sup>35</sup> This reversal shows an inconsistency in Jewish relation to being legally recognized as a race. Goldstein states that “for the first time in their history, American Jews were not trying to prevent the government from categorizing them as a race, but were fighting to be recognized in the eyes of the government as a distinct group deserving protection from racial discrimination.”<sup>36</sup> Scientifically, sociologically, and legally, Jews have an inconsistent relationship with racial identification. This evidence does not clarify the media’s framing of the riots as a racial conflict, but it allows for further race-related examination.

If the media was using a narrow American-centric understanding of race, one that confines Jews to the

archetypical white, then measuring the Lubavitch community against multiple definitions of white is required. There are several viewpoints on the notion that Jews are white. First, physically speaking, as Ripley brought, Jewish people are varied in skin colors and physical features, therefore, they cannot be simply categorized as just white. The question of Jews as whites can also be understood beyond skin color and physical features. In his podcast, "Are Jews White?", Dr. Jeremy Shere argues that whiteness in America, goes beyond skin and includes "access to social, economic, educational, and other resources and opportunities that, until fairly recently, were available more or less exclusively to members of the white, Anglo-Saxon majority in America, and to which Ashkenazi American Jews, especially, have most fully laid claim."<sup>37</sup> Ashkenazi means Jews with ancestors in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Russia.<sup>38</sup> The Lubavitch branch of the Hasidic movement originated in eighteenth century Eastern Europe.<sup>39</sup> In the early twentieth century, Lubavitchers migrated in small waves to Crown Heights. In 1940, the sect's leader escaped from Nazi-occupied France and established headquarters in Crown Heights.<sup>40</sup> While this sect attracts a variety of racial backgrounds, the majority of its Brooklyn members are Ashkenazi.<sup>41</sup> Still, however, Lubavitchers, as all Hasidic groups, stand in contrast to the greater, and often assimilated or secular, Ashkenazi group for several reasons.

Some sociologists note that Lubavitchers differ from the greater, non-Hasidic Ashkenazi population in America because their appearance marks them in the larger public and prevents them from blending in with either whites or gentiles.<sup>42</sup> Hasidic appearance is dictated by religious law and custom.<sup>43</sup> Males are forbidden from ever shaving their facial hair.<sup>44</sup> Traditionally, all males from age thirteen onward wear a wide-brimmed black felt hat, a black or navy suit, a white button-down shirt, and black shoes. Additionally, long white fringes attached to a religious undergarment protrude visibly

from underneath their shirts.<sup>45</sup> Women's dress and behavior are also restricted to religious customs.<sup>46</sup> Lubavitchers strive to live a hallowed life. They accomplish this by following conduct dictated in the Torah which sanctifies many aspects of daily life.<sup>47</sup> This hallowed life includes religious dietary laws, restricting all food consumption, preparation, and use of food vessels to standards approved by rabbinical authority.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the community encourages its members to marry within the sect, but marrying orthodox Jews out-of-sect is allowed.<sup>49</sup> For boys, education from preschool through twelfth-grade is often conducted in English and Yiddish, but the content is limited to Hebrew and Aramaic religious texts.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, secular studies do not extend beyond rudimentary math and English, and there is no preparation for college.<sup>51</sup> As far as serving as public servants, Lubavitchers generally don't aim higher than local and state office.<sup>52</sup> With a limited social connection to the greater gentile world, a disinterest in higher education, and a limited attempt for higher office, these self-prescribed restrictions illustrate that the Lubavitch community of Crown Heights does not reflect the social access that Ashkenazi Jews generally lay claim to. Moreover, in terms of similarity to white gentiles, while Crown Heights Lubavitchers in 1991 had white skin, predominantly, their circumstances point to a severe dissimilarity to white Americans in matters of social access, majority power, and a history of notable anti-Black violence. This dissimilarity to whites does not negate the possibility that Lubavitchers held and behaved in racially discriminatory ways towards Black residents. However, evidence of racist, anti-Black discrimination does not emerge from the issues that are reported to have aroused the riots.

Six major neighborhood disputes between Black and Lubavitch residents of Crown Heights led up to and fueled the riots, namely: the creation of Community Board 9, housing, police accommodation of the Lubavitchers, police double standards, neighborhood anti-crime patrols, and the Hatzalah

rumor. After years of fighting over the distribution of city resources, during which the community board was dominated by Black residents, Lubavitchers created a congruent board where they voted as a bloc. This empowered Lubavitchers, who as a minority in a majority Black neighborhood, gained a scale-tipping advantage. The anger Black residents felt by this disproportionate power was compounded by the belief that the mayor, who helped form this congruent board and who happened to be Jewish, was repaying Lubavitchers for their political support. This caused an uptick in local Black antisemitism. Lubavitchers, in turn, argued that as a neighborhood minority they had to aggressively protect their rights to a fair share of city resources. Housing also caused tensions when Lubavitch and Black locals accused the other of receiving city-subsidized housing. Additionally, Lubavitchers, trying to accommodate their growing community, offered Black locals large sums for their homes. Black residents felt that Jews were attempting to inch them out of the neighborhood. Another source of tension was the police accommodation of the Lubavitch community by closing off streets on the Sabbath and holy days. Lubavitchers argued that closing off streets was necessary to protect the thousands of pedestrian worshippers, but Black residents, who were denied driving access to their homes, had the driving lift banned. What Black locals saw as Jews receiving preferential police treatment was exacerbated by the police motorcade allotted to the Rebbe, the head of the Lubavitch sect. The Lubavitchers argued that some threatened to kill the Rebbe and, as a worldwide religious figure similar to the Pope, he had to be protected. Moreover, some argue that Black locals felt that the police had a double standard, in which they were treated harshly while Lubavitchers were not. Furthermore, the Lubavitchers, who felt easily identifiable and susceptible to violence, created civilian anti-crime patrol. Black locals rejected the concept

of an all Jewish patrol in a predominantly Black area and contended that the patrol was anti-Black in nature. In turn, the Lubavitchers invited Black locals to join the patrol. Very few did, and this coalition lasted for less than several days. Finally, the Hatzalah rumor, emerging after Lifsch fatally struck Cato, was also a source of tension between the two communities.<sup>53</sup>

There are likely multiple causes for Black locals resenting Lubavitchers. From the Black perspective, sensing a double standard in police treatment may have evoked feelings of white discrimination. Black residents may have viewed Jews badgering them to sell their homes as a hostile attempt to usurp their territory. Similarly, when Lubavitchers closed streets for worshippers, Black residents may have felt that Jews were insensitive to their fundamental needs. Moreover, Black locals may have viewed the Lubavitcher-dominated community board, as unjust as they were thought to be wielding power disproportionate to their population size. Indeed, Lubavitchers may have provoked the legitimate ire of their Black neighbors, but given the magnitude of the Lubavitcher's Jewish-centric lifestyle and the rioters' anti-Jewish violence, it would be illogical to entirely dismiss that antisemitism played a role in what motivated the rioters. However, the mere possibility of antisemitic motivation does not alone confirm its presence. Nonetheless, an exploration of Black antisemitism in America will highlight the overtones of anti-Jewish vitriol in the riots.

The list of sources from which Black antisemitism disseminated during the twentieth century in America includes: The Nation of Islam, the Black Power movement, faculty in African American Studies departments, the Pan African movement, and prominent Black intellectuals.<sup>54</sup> The effects of this dissemination can be found in the high rates of antisemitic attitudes among African Americans from surveys conducted in 1964, 1981, and 1992.<sup>55</sup> This

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information suggests that rioters in Crown Heights did not act in a void of anti-Jewish influence. From the breadth of Black antisemitism, three notions stand out as relevant to understating what motivated the rioters: self-preservation, an envy of Jews, and a difficulty categorizing Jews.

Self-preservation is alluded in James Baldwin’s article, “The Harlem Ghetto: Winter 1948,” in which he states that “when the Negro hates the Jew as a Jew he does so partly because the nation does and in much the same painful fashion that he hates himself.” Baldwin explains that Black self-hatred results from the humiliation that white America forced on Black citizens. Moreover, Baldwin describes Black antisemitism as a process in which Black people “whittled down” their humiliation to a “manageable size,” transferring it to whatever most represents their own “emasculatation.”<sup>56</sup> Crown Heights Lubavitchers enclose themselves physically and socially to a ghetto-like environment, their otherness is visibly identifiable, and their political power is marginal to that of the dominant whites. As a result of these attributes, Lubavitchers gain a disfavored ranking in American social hierarchy. From Baldwin’s view, this pitiful social standing makes Lubavitchers the perfect receptacle for Black people to transfer their

humiliation.

Nonetheless, despite their religious practice, appearance, and self-imposed separatism, Lubavitchers managed to create and thrive within their self-imposed ghetto. This success may induce Black envy. Harvard professor Robert F. Reid-Pharr writes that there is a “sense of bewilderment, of hurt that one hears in the voices of black people, particularly young black people, when we ask ourselves, ‘If the Jews could do it then why can’t we?’”<sup>57</sup> Subsequently, this hurt produces an antisemitism that Cornell West describes as “underdog resentment and envy, directed at another underdog who has made it in American society.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, some Jews rose through the ranks faster and with more ease than many Black people have. Moreover, African Americans began their march upward from a harrowing depth, while Jews began from a higher rung. As Baldwin states, “The Jewish travail occurred across the sea and America rescued him from the house of bondage. But America is the house of bondage for the Negro.”<sup>59</sup>

Beyond underdog resentment, there is a nuanced antisemitism in attitudes African Americans hold on Jewish ascension in American society. Baldwin states that “the Negro, facing a Jew, hates, at bottom, not his Jewishness but the color of his skin” and that “it is not the Jewish tradition by which he has been betrayed but the tradition of his native land.”<sup>60</sup> The notion that Jews used white skin as credentials to improve their status is indeed a source of Black resentment. But African Americans also resent their fellow white countrymen for allowing the despised Jew, of all people, to ascend, while Black people, who paid the highest price for citizenship, met with rejection.

Reid-Pharr writes that antisemitism stems not only from “the fear that Jews represent a nation within a nation,” but that it is also “impossible to pin-point exactly what

they represent.” “Into this void” of uncertainty, Reid-Pharr continues, “the antisemite deposits a conception of the Jew as devil or, at times, as saint, precisely to mitigate against Jewish inconclusivity” (sic).<sup>61</sup> Lubavitchers, who visibly signal religious piety, can evoke an aura of sanctity. However, their piety dictates a separatism that results in blatant disinterest in gentiles. Black residents of Crown Heights may have interpreted this disinterest as Lubavitchers devaluing the spiritual potential of their Black neighbors.<sup>62</sup> As a result, Black perception of Lubavitchers vacillated between sanctified people and sanctimonious organization. Moreover, Black locals’ uncertainty might have been exacerbated by perceiving Lubavitchers as wielders of disproportionate political favor despite small population size and low ranking in American social hierarchy. When Black Americans deposit hate into the void of uncertainty, Baldwin’s words from 1948 ring true: “just as a society must have a scapegoat, so hatred must have a symbol. Georgia has the Negro and Harlem has the Jew.”<sup>63</sup>

The media pigeonholed Jews to a racial classification, conflated Lubavitch Jews and archetypal American whites, and failed to relay that Black locals treated Jews with blatant antisemitism during the Crown Heights riots. When some journalists<sup>64</sup> and politicians<sup>65</sup> called the riots a pogrom, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel responded, saying, “I don’t think you can transfer language from one experience to another.”<sup>66</sup> Wiesel prefers to leave the

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use of pogrom to events containing government and police sanctioned anti-Jewish violence which he did not see in the Crown Heights riots. Wiesel argues that the riots ought to be described in words that pertain specifically to their nature. Wiesel is right—correct description matters. Black rioters in Crown Heights expressed violence and hatred during the riots, and their targets were not people who just happen to be Jewish, their target, rather, was Jewish people. The riots may not have been a pogrom, but they were not a racial clash either. Hatred takes on many forms and goes by many names and when a particular hatred is called by the wrong name, it stands to be perpetuated.

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