JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

Obituaries

# Jesse Jackson, civil rights leader whose 1984 comments undercut Jewish relations, dies at 84

Jackson's use of an antisemitic slur, criticism of Israel and association with Louis Farrakhan created a chill that only partially thawed despite attempts at reconciliation.

By Philissa Cramer February 17, 2026

Rev. Jesse Jackson poses in the Rainbow Push headquarters in Chicago, Aug. 4, 2011. (John Gress/Corbis via Getty Images)

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Black leader who sought to build a "rainbow coalition" for America's future but struggled to include Jews in it, has died at 84.

For American Jews, Jackson's use of an antisemitic epithet, criticism of Israel and association with the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan during his first presidential run in 1984 proved hard to overcome, even as the towering figure apologized in part and preached reconciliation.

“This man is brilliant, he is a leader,” Edgar Bronfman, then president of the World Jewish Congress, said in 1992 after inviting Jackson to address its conference in Brussels. “Do I trust him totally? Of course not. Because he is not a Jewish leader, he is a Black leader, he’s got a different agenda. Do I think that he and I can work together to bring the Black and Jewish communities together to fight against racism? Yes.”

Born in the Jim Crow South and educated as a Baptist minister in Chicago, Jackson emerged as a purveyor of a hopeful vision of racial inclusion and economic uplift in the years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., with whom he had worked. After clashing with other King allies over the appropriate tenor of civil rights activism, he formed his own group — ultimately called Operation PUSH — to advance his vision: uniting groups marginalized economically or politically into a governing majority to achieve economic and social justice.

Soon, his group’s economic boycotts were winning commitments to minority hiring and propelling him into the political mainstream. Jackson succeeded in negotiating the freedom of U.S. hostages abroad, including in Syria and Cuba in 1984. Soon, he was mounting a historic campaign for president, becoming only the second Black national candidate since Reconstruction. In his second Democratic primary run, in 1988, he won 11 primaries and caucuses, nabbing 7 million votes and driving a dramatic expansion in the number of Black registered voters.

But criticism dogged Jackson, even as he notched civil rights and national politics wins. Some in his own community accused him of caring more about the concerns of affluent African-Americans than about the poverty afflicting the majority of Black people in the United States; others charged him with profiting personally off of his advocacy.

Democratic presidential primary hopeful Jesse Jackson, at left, embraces Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan during a campaign rally in February 1984. (Cynthia Johnson/Getty Images)

Perhaps the most significant breaches came with American Jews, who had played a prominent role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

In 1979, he met in Lebanon with Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat in an effort to broker ties between the group and the United States. At the time, the U.S. position was not to engage with the PLO or its leader until it had acknowledged Israel's right to exist.

Jackson also visited Israel during the same trip, but two Jewish members of the delegation — including one who helped plan it after working with Jackson to oppose a Nazi march in Skokie, Illinois, the previous year — quit in protest partway through, saying that they had concluded that Jackson was a "dangerous man" who "cares not one bit about the Israeli point of view."

In 1983, soon after announcing his first presidential campaign, the far-right Jewish Defense League announced a "Jews for Jackson" effort to thwart him. The announcement prompted Jackson's first denial that he was antisemitic.

Tensions exploded early the next year when Jackson admitted that he had used the term "Hymietown" to describe New York City in what he believed had been a private conversation with a reporter. The term, an offensive slur for Jews that riffs off the name Hyman, smarted for a community that had hoped antisemitism in the United States was a thing of the past.

Jackson first denied making the comments, including during a televised national debate, but then apologized in a speech at a synagogue in Manchester, New Hampshire, ahead of the first presidential primary. “It’s human to err, divine to forgive,” he said, explaining that he had not wanted the comment to disrupt his campaign.

“I appeal to you tonight as a Jewish community to find yourself in the rainbow coalition,” Jackson continued, adding, “I categorically deny that I am either antisemitic or anti-Israel.”

At the same time, Jackson declined to distance himself from Farrakhan, a longtime associate who had introduced him at a Chicago rally. After Farrakhan made new antisemitic comments, calling Judaism a “gutter religion,” Jackson’s campaign denounced the comments but not Farrakhan himself.

Jesse Jackson meets with President Ronald Reagan at the White House, Jan. 4, 1984. Jackson had helped negotiate the release of U.S. Lt. Robert Goodman, who was captured a month earlier during a bombing raid against Syrian antiaircraft positions in Lebanon. (White House Photographic Collection)

That summer, Jackson also made new comments about Israel that violated sacrosanct beliefs among American Jewish leaders. Jackson endorsed the idea of a Palestinian state alongside Israel at a time when the idea was far out of the mainstream of American and Israeli politics. He also raised questions about U.S. military aid to Israel, saying that Israeli weapons were being used to maintain apartheid in South Africa.

Relations had soured so much that Jackson became a wedge issue during the 1988 election, when Republican strategists and figures such as Vice President George Bush suggested that Democrats were not forceful enough in condemning antisemitism.

There were some signs of openness. Jewish leaders, including Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said Jackson had met privately with them in

an effort to mend fences. “It is a different Jackson in 1988 than in 1984,” Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said at the time. “One has to recognize and welcome that certain sensitivity he is now showing.”

By the early 1990s, Jackson had made gains in building trust with segments of the Jewish community, speaking at synagogues and Jewish community forums and participating in Holocaust remembrance events. In July 1992, he made two headlining speeches condemning hatred of Jews, at the Democratic National Convention and to a World Jewish Congress meeting in Brussels.

In the World Jewish Congress speech, he condemned antisemitism, praised Zionism as a “liberation movement” and called for Jews and Blacks to renew their joint fight against racism.

“Let us not turn closed scars into open wounds in the name of freedom and candor,” he said. “Let us be wise enough to act our way into a way of thinking, and not just think and talk ourselves into not acting.”

Bronfman, the WJC’s president, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency at the time that he had invited Jackson to speak over the objections of many Jewish voices, because he wanted to make sure that a conference focused on racism against Jews also examined racism in the United States.

The speech won over some in attendance. “I was proved to be wrong,” said an Australian co-chair of the WJC’s board who had opposed Jackson’s invitation. “I do see genuine opportunities now, if we move forward, to some sort of a rapprochement.”

But Foxman said Jackson would still have to do more to convince him. “It is a record that has been marred by an insensitive view of Jewish history, the Holocaust, Zionism and the modern Jewish state, its government and their policies,” he said. “One speech to the Jewish community in the Palace of Congresses in Brussels will not repair it.”

Louis Farrakhan greets Rev. Jesse Jackson after Jackson spoke at the funeral for Aretha Franklin at the Greater Grace Temple on August 31, 2018 in Detroit. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Foxman said he would work with Jackson if Jackson chose to deliver similar comments before Black audiences in the United States.

By the late 1990s, a thaw appeared to have taken place. Yeshiva University invited Jackson to speak on the topic of Black-Jewish relations. While Jackson faced some protests at Park Avenue, at Y.U., President Norman Lamm praised him as a "leading, vibrant" activist who has "performed miracles in fostering racial harmony."

During that speech, Jackson denied that "Black antisemitism," then a topic of growing concern among Jewish leaders, was a structural phenomenon, saying that any hatred that existed was confined to misguided individuals and not a product of the community as a whole. He also argued that the far right posed a greater threat to Jews in the United States.

Around the same time, Jackson participated in a vigil on behalf of Iranian Jews outside Park East Synagogue in New York City. Rabbi Marc Schneier, whose father Arthur is Park East's rabbi, said following Jackson's death, "I have lost a cherished friend."

Jackson maintained personal relationships with other Jewish figures. Following the death in 2021 of Robert Marx, a pioneering social justice advocate and leading Reform rabbi in Chicago who drew inspiration from his experiences marching with King, Jackson issued a bereft statement praising him as "the Jewish voice for justice" and saying, "We prayed together, sang together, and marched together. When Nazis marched in Skokie, we fought hate together. We have always been together. I love him so much. I miss him already."

Jesse Jackson touches a barbed wire as he visits the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial site on the 75th anniversary of the last Nazi killings of Sinti and Roma at the camp in Poland, on Aug. 2, 2019.(Alik Keplicz / AFP via Getty Images)

Some Jewish groups eulogized Jackson on Tuesday, though often acknowledging the wrinkles in his record. “It’s no secret that there were also very painful moments in Rev. Jackson’s relationship with the Jewish community, and he is a testament to engagement even when there are deep disagreements and pain,” said the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, a civil rights group, in a statement. “He went on to be a key ally to the Jewish community, underscoring the urgency of building strong, long-lasting alliances against bigotry wherever it exists.”

Jackson announced in 2017 that he had Parkinson’s disease and had been increasingly out of the public eye. He shared a stage with Farrakhan at a memorial service for the singer Aretha Franklin in 2018 and traveled to Auschwitz in 2019 for a memorial service for the Roma victims of the Holocaust before making his last major public appearance in a wheelchair at the 2024 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. His organization announced in November that he had been hospitalized, and his family announced on Tuesday that he had “died peacefully.”

He is survived by his wife Jacqueline; six children including his son Jesse Jackson, Jr., who was elected to Congress in Illinois; and several grandchildren.