Obviously, I cannot compress the rich, long and varied histories of our two communities into this brief overview. What I hope to do is underscore the need to take these histories seriously, not to trivialize or mythologize them for the sake of an alliance which, I believe, most of us here earnestly desire. Our communities are very similar in some ways, very different in others. We must learn to respect and love each other in the fulness of our differences, or the chances are we will not come to respect and love each other at all.

We share a perception of ourselves as vulnerable minorities, people who have endured persecution, discrimination and hostility toward us based on no other reason than our group identity. There is truth to this self-perception and to the reality which underlies it. We cannot tell our own stories without emphasizing the persecution and suffering which have forged our consciousness. There are healthy and unhealthy aspects of this emphasis on martyrdom. I hope this conference -- this coming together -- will help us to separate the healthy and unhealthy and to build on the open and positive aspects of our self-understanding.
While we have a kind of overlapping historical experience as victims, it is also true that each of our communities is guilty-by-association with larger groups that are seen by us as oppressers.

Jews may not think of themselves as "white," for example, because there are Jews of almost every color and culture from the Bnai Israel of India to the Yemmenites of Southern Arabia to the Black Jews of Ethiopia. But we must realize that we are perceived as whites by most blacks, and whatever our personal attitudes and commitments, we live in a society with deep strains of racism. On the other side of the equation, blacks as blacks have not persecuted Jews, but Christians as Christians surely have. Starting with the Crusades, the violence done to Jews in the name of Christianity -- the denial of citizenship, the burning of our holy books, our confinement inside ghettos, the pogroms and expulsions, all in the name of Jesus -- boggles the imagination. Blacks have not been the perpetrators of this cruelty, but whatever their personal attitudes and commitments, they share in a culture with deep strains of antisemitism.

To better understand each other, it is thus imperative that we listen to one another's histories, communal as well as personal. I do not suggest a competition for sympathy. The fact that another group has suffered unjustly does not make its position on a specific issue automatically right. But we cannot understand where that group is coming from without hearing the story.

Not too long after ABC-TV produced the landmark series, "Roots," some people at NBC-TV came up with the idea of doing a docu-drama series on the Holocaust. I was invited to a pre-broadcast screening of one of this series, which dramatized, through the story of one family, the destruction of European Jewry during the Nazi era. When the screening was over, the
first comment came from a black woman sitting near me. She asked what was the purpose of re-hashing this history, of raking over the coals of the past. She seemed annoyed, almost resentful, and was only somewhat mollified to learn that the series was conceived for the same reason that the "Roots" series had been produced.

I was baffled by her attitude, and finally concluded that her resentment to this series was prompted by the fear that it might deflect the considerable sympathy for the plight of blacks in the United States that had been generated by "Roots." I can think of no other explanation.

This is an attitude we cannot afford. We must take our own and each other's history seriously, first, because they make us who we are, and second, because they stand as correctives to certain triumphalist claims of our country and of Western Culture. I believe in the American dream, I believe that racial, ethnic and religious barriers to full and equal participation in American life can be removed. But, lest we get carried away by the self-congratulatory glow of our forthcoming Constitutional bicentennial celebrations, the history of slavery is there to remind us.

I am also partly a product of the Western tradition. But, lest we get carried away by claims of Christianity's civilized influence on the barbarians, the history of the Jews is there to remind us.

I must stress that the purpose of this mutual exploration is not to point the finger of guilt. I will accept no personal responsibility for what the slaveholders did to the slave. (My own family came much later.) But I cannot behave responsibly in terms of race relations in the United States
today without knowing the story of slavery in America and the subsequent history of black Americans. Similarly, Jews cannot hold black Christians -- in fact, any Christians born since World War II -- responsible for the Holocaust, but you cannot behave responsibly in terms of Christian-Jewish relations in the United States today without knowing something of the Jewish experience in Christendom, including the Holocaust and the meaning of the State of Israel for Jews.

Whatever else these two days together will do for us -- and I hope and pray they will forge bonds of mutual understanding, friendship and trust that will carry into the next century -- I hope above all they will lead us to understand and internalize each other's history.

Let us begin!