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“Why Jews Were A Major Ally of African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement”

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During the 1950s and 1960s there was a major Civil Rights movement in the United States to achieve equality for African Americans, especially in the south. During that time, Jews became highly involved in the struggle. According to the encyclopedic website “My Jewish Learning,” and the Public Broadcasting Station, Jews only made up 1 or 2% of the United States population, but at least 30% of the white people who went south to fight for Civil Rights were Jewish. More than 50% of the Civil Rights attorneys in the south were Jews. More than two-thirds of the Freedom Riders desegregating Interstate transportation were Jewish. Why? They risked their lives. There must have been something very powerful to get them to do it.

Because of the oppression, slavery and exile that both groups experienced, because of Jewish values, and because Jews of all people know that no freedom is secure unless all are free, Jews became the major ally of African Americans during the Civil Rights movement.

The Torah says that thousands of years ago the Jews were enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years. According to the story we tell at Passover, Moses led them out of slavery. After gaining their freedom, they established their own country in the land of Canaan. But after many hundreds of years they were defeated by other empires and eventually kicked out of their homeland.

Through all the centuries following, Jews were oppressed and looked down upon wherever they fled because they were different. They looked different, they had different beliefs and different customs. In every land they were in, they were made to feel like they didn't belong.

From the 1500s to the 1800s, Africans were taken by Europeans out of Africa to the New World to be slaves. But even after slavery was abolished, they were looked down upon and oppressed here. Laws were made so that they couldn't vote or have the same rights that others have. They were kept separate by segregation and were always made to feel like they didn't belong. Eventually, they knew that, like the Israelites, they would have to free themselves from this oppression.

During slavery and afterward, many black people used the Jewish Exodus from slavery and the Zionist movement for inspiration. A famous black spiritual goes, "Go down Moses, and let my people go." Many African American churches have the word "Zion" in their names. Harriet Tubman, a leader of the Underground Railroad to bring slaves to freedom during the 1800s, called herself "Moses." The day before Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, he gave one of his most famous speeches saying, "I have been to the mountaintop... And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land."

Moses could not get into the Promised Land either, but the Torah says he did go to the mountaintop and looked over to see the promised land of the Israelites.

Martin Luther King was making the connection between the experience of Jews and African Americans, because he understood their shared experience.

At the time of the Civil Rights movement both Jews and African Americans were discriminated against. Not only had both groups been taken or thrown out of their homeland, but in their new country both groups were still looked at as strangers who were not equal to people who were white.

Another bond between African Americans and Jews was created by Jewish support for black colleges in the south. Many Jews, such as philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, who was the chairman of Sears Roebuck and lived from 1862 to 1932, donated money to support black schools in the south. Also many German Jewish professors who had fled Hitler couldn't find jobs at universities in the United States because of anti-Semitism. But black universities in the south welcomed them, because other white professors wouldn't teach there. They bonded with their black students, who were very grateful to have them there.

In 1955, a 14-year old boy named Emmett Till was killed by a white mob in Mississippi for daring to speak to a white woman. This murder made many whites in the United States more sympathetic to discrimination against African Americans. A few months later, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. African Americans rallied to her cause, and Black ministers began a bus boycott. The Civil Rights Movement was born. Martin Luther King became a well-known public supporter and leader.

From the beginning, many of Martin Luther King's advisors were Jewish leaders, like rabbis and people in business. One of Martin Luther King's closest and most trusted advisors from 1955 until King's death was Stanley Levison, a Jewish lawyer from New York, who helped King write many of his speeches and organized many Civil Rights events.

King showed his appreciation and his shared values by supporting the Jews in return. He was an early supporter of the new State of Israel. He called Israel's right to exist "incontestable" and said, "We must stand with all of our might to protect its right to exist and its territorial integrity." He spoke out in support of Jews in the Soviet Union. And King spoke of Jews' and African Americans' common struggle to make it impossible for any people to oppress another. This support from King bonded Jews even more to the black struggle. They knew that they were stronger if they worked together.

There were real dangers for Jews who came out in support of Civil Rights. During the movement, many Jewish participants were beaten, arrested, and some were killed. Freedom Riders were beaten while police watched, doing nothing. Rabbi Israel Dresner was one of them. Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld was badly beaten with a tire iron while trying to register black voters in Mississippi in 1964.

Also in 1964, two Jewish Civil Rights workers from the north, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, along with their black fellow worker James Chaney, were murdered by white segregationists in Mississippi.

It was dangerous to participate in the Civil Rights movement. But Jews had a history of activism and fighting for people's rights.

For example, in 1909 Jews were among the founders of the NAACP, the civil rights organization for African Americans and other minorities.

During the 1930s, Jews were a major part of the Labor Movement, which created more equality in the workplace and gave workers more pay, security, and better working conditions. My great-grandfather, Louis Weitz, was an active supporter of the Labor Movement during those times and ran for elective office in the New York State Assembly.

In 1948, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild gave a Yom Kippur sermon in Atlanta, in which he said that he was ashamed of race hatred in the south, and asked that Jews “be among those who are willing to do something” about it. In 1958 his synagogue was bombed, like the churches and homes of many black leaders in the south, for his support of Civil Rights for African Americans.

A long tradition of Jewish values also led to their participation in the Civil Rights Movement. It is a tradition that teaches good deeds, justice, respect, and human dignity.

Religious Jews who supported the Civil Rights movement could find their motivation in the Torah. Most of the Jews who traveled south for the Civil Rights movement were secular Jews. But even if we're secular Jews, our values came from somewhere. Many Jewish values originated in the Torah. As Humanistic Jews we no longer believe that if we don't follow God's commandments from the Torah we have sinned. But as Rabbi Sherman Wine said, Judaism is a culture. A culture is not just commandments to follow but it is a way to live, and we learn that way from our ancestors and from our experiences.

The Humanistic principle is to be responsible people, and faithful to our values. As a result of long centuries of values passed down from one generation to another we are not just willing to help in such movements as Civil Rights, but we know we have an obligation and a duty to do it. Good people cannot be silent when they see injustice.

In almost every land that Jews went to in the Diaspora, they were viewed and treated as aliens, not deserving the same rights and respect. But to Jews, justice, respect and human dignity do not only apply to one group of people but to everyone.

Whether Jews believe in God or not, their tradition tells them that all human beings are equal as brothers and sisters. The values that Jews learn apply to everyone in the human family, not just themselves. Racism is therefore against Jewish principles. Freedom Rider Rabbi Israel Dresner said that when “God breathed life into man's nostrils He didn't seem too concerned with making differences between white, black and yellow.”

The tradition of the Sabbath, which originated in the Torah, taught Jews that people deserve freedom and dignity, and not to be treated as slaves.

Another Torah commandment says that Jews should treat the stranger among us as one of our own, because we also were once strangers in the land of Egypt. Because African Americans were being wrongly treated, Jews felt they had to help. At that time, African Americans were “the stranger that dwelled with us.”

Rabbis wrote in the Midrash that if you are to study and learn mitzvot but not do them it is better if you had not been born. We cannot really say that we have ethics if we are not willing to act on them. If we see injustice we must do our best to correct it. Knowing about injustice and not trying to change it is an evil itself.

Rabbi Dresner explained his participation in the Civil Rights Movement by comparing African Americans' situation to the Nazis' treatment of the Jews, saying that if someone had interfered perhaps there would not be six million dead. Martin Luther King agreed, saying that perhaps the Nazis could have been stopped if more Christians had protested.

The history of slavery and the Holocaust made Jews not only understand that discrimination and persecution are evil, but also that we have to fight for justice and survival and not wait to be rescued. Jews wanted to feel free and safe in this country.

But they realized that what was happening to African Americans could also happen to them unless rights were protected. They needed to make Democracy safe for all people. They didn't want to wind up ever again in a country where there was no freedom and justice.

So Jews were very enthusiastic about Civil Rights in this country.

The Civil Rights Movement started for African Americans but it helped all Americans. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, making it a law that every person regardless of race, color, religion or national origin has the same equality and rights in this country.

And in 1965 the Voting Rights Act was passed, to make sure that everyone's right to vote is safe. It might surprise you to know that both laws were written at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. Jews can be proud that they helped create these laws.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the alliance between African Americans and Jews began to fade. There were many reasons. Many black people were angered by the lack of support among Jews for affirmative action. Society began to accept Jews and so they became more successful, but African Americans did not have the same opportunities, so some of them became resentful.

Other African Americans began to support violent movements for black power, movements that did not accept white people – including Jews – as part of them.

But that has not stopped Jews from speaking out against injustice when they see it. In the Sudan recently, black Africans have been forced out of their homes, tortured and killed by Arab tribes. Jews have stepped forward to organize movements to stop the killing. This year, an 18-year old Jewish High School student named Adam Zuckerman organized rallies and raised \$6,000 for the “Save Darfur Coalition.” He says he was inspired by Jewish traditions of social activism. According to Zuckerman, “If you're not standing up for people who are oppressed then your belief is just words.”

My father, Saul Weitz, joined Martin Luther King's March on Washington in 1963, because he believed in fighting for Civil Rights too. Rabbi Joachim Prinz was among the speakers that day, saying, "When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under Hitler, the most important thing I learned is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent problem, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem, is silence."

Elie Wiesel agreed that the greatest sin of all is silence and indifference. He was imprisoned by the Nazis in a concentration camp, where his mother, father, and sister, and many of his Jewish friends died. He dedicated his life to making sure that no one ever forgets what happened and that it never happens again. He said that it is a moral responsibility of all people to fight hatred, racism and genocide wherever it happens. He said:

"Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must at that moment become the center of the universe. One person – a Raoul Wallenberg, an Albert Schweitzer, a Martin Luther King Jr. – one person of integrity can make a difference, a difference of life and death... While their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs."

When I visited the Holocaust Memorial Yad Vashem in Israel, I saw the Avenue of the Righteous where trees are planted in honor of non-Jews who helped the Jews during the Holocaust. I saw trees dedicated to Raoul Wallenberg, Oskar Schindler, and even a priest. Israel honored these people because Jews know that the struggle for freedom and equality has nothing to do with race, religion or country.

Because we know what it is to be persecuted, enslaved and killed, because we have values that we live by, and because we know that our own freedom is not protected unless it is protected for everyone, we must act when we see injustice. Like the Jews who helped win Civil Rights for everyone in this country, we will not be silent.

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