

Jews and the Struggle for Civil Rights

Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Jewish Community,
by Marc Schneier
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REVIEWED BY MOTI RIEBER

Perhaps no other episode in American Jewish history has given Jews as much pride as their community's role in the civil rights movement of the '50's and '60's. Every time a Farrakhan speaks an anti-Semitic phrase, or attention is called to the sometimes troubled contemporary relationship between blacks and Jews, the Jewish community is likely to respond by pointing to the fact that it was engaged in the civil rights struggle far out of proportion to its numbers in the general population — something of an “after all we've done for them” response. Those few names that manage to remain in the historical consciousness forty years later — Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, for example, or Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who paid the ultimate price — are a source of continuing pride for the Jewish community.

But is this perception of involve-

ment an accurate one? Exactly how much was the Jewish community, or were Jews as individuals, involved in the civil rights movement? Was this involvement and support unanimous, or were there fissures in what many remember as our finest hour?

Montgomery to Memphis

This is the subject of Rabbi Marc Schneier's fine book, *Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Jewish Community*. In this exceptionally well-researched study, Rabbi Schneier traces Dr. King's career from the Montgomery bus boycott to the 1963 March on Washington to King's assassination in 1968 in Memphis. At each step he shows exactly who Dr. King's Jewish allies were, and what roles they played. He also analyzes, with great sympathy and understanding, who among the Jewish community did not support Dr. King and

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why, and who gave public support but did not come through when it counted most.

Although Rabbi Heschel's name appears throughout, and there is a full chapter dedicated to his civil rights work, the main strength of the book is its bringing out of the mists of history the names that we might not otherwise remember. Among these are Rabbi Israel Dresner, who was beaten and arrested as a Freedom Rider in 1961 in Birmingham; arrested for unlawful assembly for attempting to be served at a lunch counter in Tallahassee with black fellow clergy members — an action that led to a Supreme Court case with Dresner's name on it; and arrested in Albany, Georgia for demonstrating outside the county courthouse in 1962.

Another wonderful aspect of this book are the many quotes that Rabbi Schneier has rescued from history's subconscious, such as this one from Rabbi Dresner:

The segregationist makes no fine distinction between the Negro and the Jew. The racists of America fly blindly at both of us, caring not at all which of us falls. Their aim is to maintain, through crude segregation, groups whose uses as scapegoats can facilitate their political and social rule over all people. Our common fight is against these deadly enemies of democracy and our glory is that we are chosen to prove that courage is a characteristic of oppressed

people, however cynically and brutally they are denied full equality and freedom. (p. 70)

The book begins with two chapters of overview, the first of King's life and career, and the second on the Jewish tradition of social justice, which Schneier believes to be the basis for Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement. The chapters then proceed chronologically, incident by incident, campaign by campaign. Later chapters deal with Rabbi Heschel, the splits within the civil rights movement, and the growing rift in black-Jewish relations.

Active Jewish Involvement

Throughout it all, Schneier finds Jews all over the civil rights movement, and every episode in the thirteen short years between Montgomery and Memphis has a Jewish name attached to it, including, among many others:

- Dr. Marvin C. Goldstein, who integrated his Atlanta dental practice just after the Second World War, well before the question of civil rights was even on the radar screen of most white Americans;
- King's trusted friend and advisor, Stanley Levenson, with whom he spoke nearly every day;
- Morris Abram, who led a fourteen-year legal and political campaign against Georgia's county unit electoral system, which favored white voters in rural districts over black urban voters, sometimes by margins

of one hundred to one; led efforts throughout the '50's to "unmask" the Ku Klux Klan, leading to laws in fifty-three cities which said that the Klan could not rally in their masks; and later served as United States representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights, as legal counsel to the Peace Corps, as president of the American Jewish Committee, and as president of Brandeis University;

- Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, the head of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, who announced support for the Montgomery bus boycott, and various of King's other campaigns throughout the years;

- Allard Lowenstein, who helped develop the idea of the 1962 voter registration drive in which Goodman, Schwerner, and James Chaney were killed. (Interestingly, Schneier brings evidence that the organizers of this campaign were not at all averse to the idea that some northern whites might die for the cause. They believed, with reason, that the deaths of a few white people would have as much impact nationally as the death of a dozen black people.);

- Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who spoke after Jesse Jackson at the 1963 March on Washington and said, "The most important thing I learned [in Berlin under Hitler] is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence." (p. 97)

Southern and Northern Jewish Views

Although Schneier takes pains to stress the prophetic and social justice aspect of Jewish tradition, he also mentions early on that most of the Jews involved in the civil rights movement were secular and unaffiliated, little if at all conscious of the specifically Jewish element of what they were doing. Having established this, however, Schneier lets the matter drop, and since much of the writings, resolutions and history that he uncovers were from rabbis and such organizations as the American Jewish Congress — that is, identified, affiliated and nationally prominent Jews — the secular nature of most Jewish involvement tends to get lost a bit.

Of course, Jews were not always on the right side in this struggle, and Schneier makes sure to mention these instances as well. Southern Jews, reliving age-old diaspora fears, were afraid that any support they might show for blacks would endanger their own hard won position in the southern middle class. For instance, Dick Rich of Atlanta's Rich's department store knew that if he desegregated his store he would lose white clients, and if he didn't, he would lose black ones. In fact he lost many of both. Southern Jews, afraid — with good cause — of white supremacist violence, by and large chose to keep their heads down, and resented the intrusion of their northern co-religionists, who mostly supported the cause from afar. The Southerners feared they put the

lives and status of Southern Jews in danger. Rabbi William Malev, expressing what Schneier calls a “consensus” among southern rabbis, said “[N]o one has the right to martyr someone else for the cause he believes in.” (p. 40)

Organized Jewish Support

By and large, Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, B’nai Brith, and especially the Reform movement’s Central Conference of American Rabbis and UAHC, were supportive of King’s work, and often invited King to speak in front of their groups. Many of those northern Jews, of course, were more interested in passing resolutions in support of Dr. King than in getting their heads beat in for him. When the CCAR, meeting in Atlantic City in 1964, received a telegram from Dr. King asking them to join him in the dangerous — and only partially successful — action in St. Augustine, Florida, only 16 of them went. And when Dr. King started to speak out strongly against the war in Vietnam, President Johnson tried to intimidate the organized Jewish community from doing likewise by threatening to cut support for Israel if Jewish organizations spoke out publicly against the war.

King’s own affection for the Jewish community is also covered in great detail. Of course, the civil rights movement, like the Negro spirituals before it, took a great deal of its imagery and inspiration from

the Hebrew Bible, especially the Exodus story and the various prophets of social justice, who in particular seem to have been role models for King. King was also outspoken on the subject of the plight of Soviet Jewry at a time when that issue was just beginning to generate attention from American Jews. He appeared at conferences and sent messages of support on the issue (in which Heschel was a major player) whenever his busy schedule permitted, and he continually tried to steer civil rights organizations away from a path of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism — terms he thought were synonymous.

A Strained Relationship

As Schneier observes, over time increasing strains developed in the black-Jewish relationship. In part this was due to blacks’ internalization of traditional Southern anti-Semitism, and later, to an increasingly “blacks-only” attitude on the part of some civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) after 1965. In addition, there was an increasing perception among some blacks of Israel’s Arab enemies as “fellow colored victims of Western imperialism.” All of this, of course, only served to turn off the Jewish community, which, while continuing to be politically supportive of the mainstream civil rights organizations, slowed noticeably their personal and financial involvement in the move-

ment.

While Schneier draws out these points in great detail — that is, the reason for the decline of the black-Jewish relationship from the black side of the street — he makes no mention of any part the Jews may have played in this deteriorating situation. For instance, all throughout this period, Jews were moving out of city and near suburban neighborhoods just as fast as blacks could move into them, crippling King's dreams of integration to this day. Theoretically, if those Jews had stayed, the neighborhoods would have been more integrated, the urban infrastructure would have remained stronger, government probably would have given more resources

to the cities and the entire landscape of the last thirty years might have been different. This couldn't help but cause disappointment and resentment on the part of blacks who had bought into King's integrationist vision.

Despite relatively minor criticisms — including a high number of typos that one would not expect in a professionally published book — *Shared Dreams* is a valuable contribution to the history of the civil rights movement, and to the role of American Jews in it. Schneier reminds us that the Jewish community certainly has reason to be proud of the participation of some of its bravest members during this important period in American history.