

AFRICAN AMERICAN–JEWISH RELATIONS

AN AJC HISTORY

THE ARTHUR AND ROCHELLE BELFER CENTER
FOR AMERICAN PLURALISM

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

The Arthur & Rochelle Belfer Center for American Pluralism, at the American Jewish Committee, builds intergroup relations, fosters mutual understanding, and seeks to strengthen a democratic, pluralist and just society as the best security for Jews and all other groups in America.

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AJC's century-long legacy of deep commitment to pluralism, democratic values, and the advancement of civil and human rights for all people is embodied in our work with the African American community and is visible in a timeline of that history.

The timeline demonstrates that Jews and African Americans have worked in years past, together and separately, to oppose hate, racism, discrimination, and segregation—advocating for civil rights reforms so that our nation might fulfill its promise of liberty and equal rights for all.

While the relationship has waxed and waned in the past three decades, there are both imperatives and opportunities to renew it today—shared interests in voting rights and election reform, fiscal equity and strengthening public schools, affirmative action and diversity, and the vital issues of economic and social justice.

This is a multifaceted task, building relationships and trust with individual leaders, and educating each other's communities. We seek to identify a shared issue-based agenda on the national and local levels, with the goal of sustaining meaningful partnerships for joint advocacy, while fostering an increased understanding of the issues particular to each group.

Responding to our increasingly diverse America, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was clear that no single ethnic or religious minority can succeed independently, when he spoke of the "inescapable network of mutuality." As the new century has brought rapid demographic changes and a deepening cultural and socio-economic divide, we need to strengthen a democratic pluralistic America and embody that sense of mutuality to assure the well-being of our communities and our country.





Jesse Owens, the African American track and field star, wins four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics, held in Nazi Berlin.

American Jewish Committee

1913

Advocates for civil rights legislation in New York State to end discrimination in public accommodations, resorts, and amusement parks, resulting in the passage of a law that serves as a model for other Northern states.

1934

Provides financial assistance to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for its campaign to pass federal anti-lynching legislation.

1936

Organizes an international conference on race to debunk the myth of Aryan supremacy during the year that an African American track star, Jesse Owens, wins the gold medal at the Olympics, held in Hitler's Berlin.

1937

Founds the Radio Broadcasting Department to focus on human and civil rights issues, such as fair access to public housing for all races, in its radio broadcasts.

1940s

1941-1945

Campaigns to expose the "divide and conquer" nature of Nazi propaganda—thereby promoting American unity and championing religious, ethnic, political, and racial pluralism.

1945

Inaugurates anti-discrimination campaigns, enlisting the cooperation of the CIO and AFL to spread its message of intergroup harmony publicly, in addition to similar campaigns with women, farmers, youth, veterans, African Americans, clergy, and businessmen.

Advocates the passage of state and federal fair-employment laws, pressing both labor and management to support such measures.

AJC top leaders Joseph Proskauer and Jacob Blaustein lobby successfully for the inclusion of a "Bill of Rights" in the UN Charter.

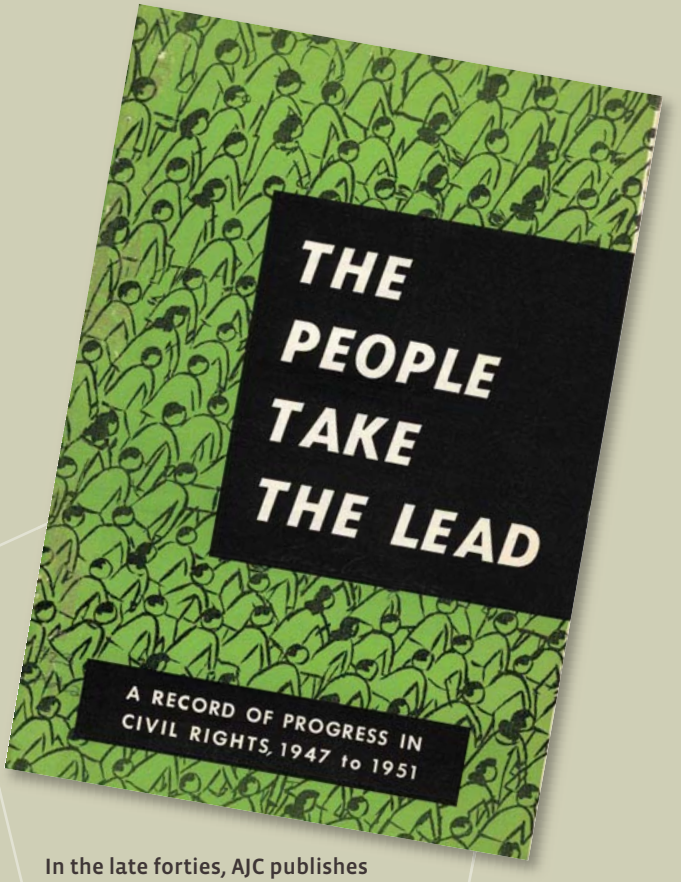
1947

Creates and airs ads to combat anti-Semitism and group prejudice of all kinds—on highly popular programs such as *Superman*.

Begins a new civil rights program "aimed at achieving equality for all Americans in education, housing, employment, public accommodations, and related areas."

Begins publication of *The People Take the Lead*, an annual report on progress in the cause of civil rights.

Reaffirms support for federal anti-lynching legislation, which tragically fails, and legislation outlawing poll taxes that present an unconstitutional barrier to black voting rights, which eventually succeeds.



In the late forties, AJC publishes *The People Take the Lead*, an annual survey of civil rights progress.



On the television show *Open Mind,* Dr. Alex Rosen, Bayard Rustin, Eric Goldman, Dr. John Slawson, and Dr. Kenneth Clark (l. to r.) discuss "The Negro and Anti-Semitism."

Early 1950s

Produces *Spots before Your Eyes*, a series of eight animated cartoons that air on TV stations throughout the nation, aimed at promoting tolerance and cooperation between different groups, including—in a pioneering move—women.

Undertakes massive campaign to support a national Fair Employment Practices Commission for civil rights advocacy, and providing advice on fair hiring practices and diversity in the private sector to President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

1950

Sponsors *Studies in Prejudice*, a pioneering five-volume work probing the social and psychological roots of authoritarianism and racial and religious hatred.

1952

Sponsors a Yale University Divinity School survey of racial and religious bias in Protestant church literature.

1954

Chief Justice Earl Warren cites psychologist Kenneth Clark's AJC-sponsored study of segregation's effects on African-American children in the landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, ending segregation in public schools.

1956

Testifies before the House and Senate in favor of the pending Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first civil rights legislation in 82 years.

late 50s-early 60s

1957

Releases a study showing that residential patterns are the primary cause of segregated schools, then affirms that segregation must be ended.

1958

Two weeks after a pro-segregation zealot bombs an Atlanta synagogue, AJC President Irving M. Engel reaffirms the agency's unwavering support for desegregation in a speech to shaken AJC leaders.

1959

Sets minimum goals for desegregation, including intergroup education programs, improving inferior schools to equalize educational opportunities, redistricting for minority inclusion, and school sites selected to further integrate schools.

Late 50s/early 60s

Distributes materials identifying the various hate groups in the South and defending the Supreme Court's decisions on desegregation.

Works with the Southern Regional Conference on a study of 500 plus instances of racial violence, sharing the data with law-enforcement officials.

Advances funds to African Americans whose credit sources were choked off, and to save the one integrationist, anti-Klan paper in Mississippi.

Writes an amicus brief in *NAACP v. Alabama*, a case protesting the state's attempt to seize NAACP membership lists.

Works with community groups, particularly the Consultative Council on Desegregation, to suggest techniques for peaceful desegregation, with particular success in Miami, Atlanta, and Dallas.

AJC's Westchester and New York Chapters conduct "human relations" training for teachers to ease the process of desegregation.



A classroom in Topeka, Kansas, shortly after the start of integration.



AJC President Morris B. Abram (second from left), cochairman of the 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights, meets with William T. Coleman, Jr., prominent civil rights lawyer (seated center), President Lyndon B. Johnson (right), and other officials to plan the conference.

1960

Works with NBC on *Destiny's Tot*, a film exploring the psychological roots of bigotry.

Initiates a study of "executive suite" discrimination with Harvard and UCLA business schools.

Founds the Institute for American Pluralism to build coalitions with other ethnic, religious, and racial groups and to promote diversity.

1961

New York passes a state law prohibiting racial or ethnic discrimination in the sale of rental or private housing, after an intense campaign promoting the legislation by AJC's New York Chapter.

1962

Awards the American Liberties Medallion to Thurgood Marshall, the primary lawyer arguing for desegregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

1963

Endorses the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, with AJC members participating.

Convenes more than 100 Jewish business leaders for a national conference on creating a more integrated work force. One month later, AJC chapters organize equal-opportunity councils.

Creates a Commission on Race Relations, which promotes "training programs for minority groups and for personnel interviewers."

Works with labor unions, the Urban League, and the Randolph Institute to open up apprenticeships for minorities.

On the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation convenes the National Conference on Race and Religion, bringing together over 600 delegates in behalf of racial equality.

1965

Awards Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., its American Liberties Medallion; Joseph Proskauer, in introducing him, says: "He is a modern Moses and the modern Pharaohs must give way."

Co-chairs White House planning conference for implementation of the Economic Opportunity Act.

Marches in the Voting Rights March from Selma to Montgomery, after assisting with the publicity and planning. Several chapters conduct local marches.

After the 1965 Watts riot, initiates the Southern California Merit Employment Conference, which arranges for corporations and the California Retailers Association to find jobs for several hundred unemployed men and women.

Leads in establishing the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee, which sends attorneys to the South to aid and represent civil rights workers.

1966

AJC's Philadelphia Chapter publishes *Case Study of a Race Riot*, highlighting "the poor housing, education and employment patterns, abrasive police-community relations, and other deep-seated problems," and recommends "positive attention programs for their solution."

Presents the American Liberties Medallion, to President Lyndon B. Johnson for his leadership in the civil rights struggle, and pays special tribute to Chief Justice Earl Warren.

1968

Responds to the Kerner Commission Report about inner-city disturbances with hands-on chapter programs to provide economic and housing aid.

Initiates the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief and, with interfaith aid groups, leases eight cargo aircraft for a massive airlift.



An AJC delegation joins the Voting Rights March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.



AJC's Project Interchange brings African American leaders on educational trips to Israel.

1970s and 1980s

1971

Establishes the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights.

1974

Cosponsors a conference on Black-Jewish relations, amid tensions over affirmative action.

1977

Files an amicus curiae brief in the *University of California Regents v. Bakke* case, rejecting rigid quotas but advocating for affirmative action, including goals and timetables.

1979

Gathers information on private clubs that discriminate in membership, in initiative requested by the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs.

1982

Establishes the Atlanta Black-Jewish Coalition, to support reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act.

Initiates Hands Across the Campus, a high school program, to educate students about diversity, democratic values, and civic involvement.

1985

Funds the first of many Project Interchange seminars sending African American leaders on educational trips to Israel.

Co-develops and establishes Operation Understanding, a program in response to increasing tension and waning communication between African Americans and Jews.

1986

Co-sponsors the first conference bringing together black divinity students and rabbinical students.

1990s

Launches the "No One Is Born Hating" PR campaign, to confront a resurgence of hate groups.

The Boston Chapter inaugurates its Black-Jewish Economic Round Table.

1992

AJC's New Jersey Chapter leads eighteen state ethnic and religious groups in the formation of the Stamp Out Hate Coalition.

1993

Atlanta's first Project Understanding: Black–Jewish Young Leadership Retreat, now a biannual initiative, brings young leaders in the African American and Jewish communities to share and learn from each and act on issues that affect their own communities and the community at large.

1996

Responds, in partnership with the National Council of Churches and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, to an arson epidemic that destroyed dozens of churches, mostly African American, by raising more than $200,000 for the rebuilding effort.

Partners with Howard University to jointly publish *CommonQuest: the Magazine of Black Jewish Relations*, for the purpose of exploring the relationship and larger issues of identity, race, and pluralism—a project that lasts four years.

1997

Launches, in partnership with Giant Food and the Greater Washington Urban League, Project REAP (Real Estate Associate Program), to open professional opportunities in commercial real estate for minorities.



AJC leaders join church leaders in celebrating the reconstruction of Gay's Hill Baptist Church, which was burned to the ground in an arson epidemic against African American churches and rebuilt with AJC assistance; CommonQuest magazine published jointly by Howard University and AJC.

2001

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, publishes the first edition of *America's Table®: A Thanksgiving Reader*, celebrating Americans' diverse roots and shared values.

AJC's Atlanta Chapter takes the lead in convening community leaders, African American partners, and legislators to remove the Confederate battle cross from the Georgia state flag.

2003

Supports the University of Michigan in two U.S. Supreme Court affirmative action cases, arguing that diversity provides preparation for success in a pluralistic democracy.

2005

AJC's Belfer Center and the Department of Interreligious Affairs launch the EngagingAmerica.org Web site—a unique, virtual resource library open to all for practitioners of intergroup relations.

Funds recovery efforts of New Orleans synagogues, churches, and a historically black and Catholic school, Xavier University.

2006

Brings the Pan-Methodist leadership, including leaders from historically African American churches, on an educational trip to Israel through Project Interchange.

Joins with a nationwide coalition of civil rights groups in pushing for passage of legislation renewing for twenty-five years the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act. The reauthorization bill is signed into law by President Bush in July 2006.

2000s



In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, AJC's ACCESS young leaders go to New Orleans to do hands-on renovation.

The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over; combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.



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