

WHY SHOULD JEWS MARK BLACK HISTORY MONTH?

**The imagery of EXODUS**—not just for Passover. It **runs through our Shabbat service** (ex. Miriam's song at the Red Sea). **We know that this imagery was important to Black slaves yearning for liberation. We have shared a common history of oppression--**

**The act of liberation has been a defining moment for both our people's. Unlike many other cultures, we look back and do not claim we are descended from kings, but from slaves. The celebration of the Sabbath marks that even slaves can rest free, acc to R. Michael Lerner**

**We have tried to actualize the utopian views of the prophets and were thus joined in what the rabbi-historian Arthur Hertzberg termed the "comradeship of excluded peoples."**

And our two peoples, with **all of our differences, have a long history of interacting—**

\***Julius Rosenwald** who donated millions to support the education of African American children in the rural South, in the first half of the 20th century

\*The Spingarn brothers -- **Joel Elias and Arthur Barnette Spingarn**—well to-do liberals held offices in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1913--

Jewish newspapers early in the twentieth century compared the black movement out of the South ( the Great Migration) to the exodus from Egypt, noted that both blacks and Jews lived in ghettos, and described anti-black riots in the South as pogroms. Even European Jews voiced compassion for the American black. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was translated into both Yiddish and Hebrew.

The popularity of "**Zion**" **in the names of black churches** shows the extent to which the experience of the exodus resonated among blacks. Black nationalists used the Zionist movement as a model for their own back-to-Africa movement. Finally, blacks used the example of the upward social and economic mobility and bourgeois values of Jews as a model for their own people.

Edward Shapiro notes: For many Jews, it became an article of faith that the fates of blacks and Jews were intertwined. Jews were propelled into the civil rights movement by the belief that Jews and blacks shared the same agenda stemming not only from idealism but also from **self-interest. Jews would benefit the more America moved toward a society of merit in which religious, ethnic, and racial barriers were unimportant.** Jewish leaders stressed the similarities rather than the differences between the Jewish and black experience in America. Both groups, they asserted, were powerless and victims of persecution. Both included in their ranks martyrs to American intolerance--in more recent times, Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner murdered during the Miss summer voting rts project

**But then there was a major rift**—the 1970s controversies, such as those over community school boards in NYC, fanned by narrow-minded people like Ed Koch, and Rev Farrakhan

Jews have continued to call for the **maintenance of the Black-Jewish alliance despite the socioeconomic differences** between the two groups. Even admitting that American Jews were no longer among the oppressed, some argued Jews should continue to identify with blacks—as Leonard Fein put it, because of "our continuing need to see ourselves among the miserable-or, at least, the still-threatened." The involvement of Jews in the civil rights movement, Fein concluded, "has helped preserve our sense of ourselves as still, and in spite of all the successes we've known, among the oppressed, hence also among the decent, the just, the virtuous."

**Cornell** in the late 1950s—"black" was a synonym for Jewish, so that Jewish fraternities were called "black houses."

Despite, however, what affinity they might have felt to Jews, blacks believed that there was **still a vast racial gulf separating the two groups**. No matter how much Jews did for blacks, in black eyes **Jews were whites with all the privileges accruing to those with white skins**. For blacks, the great fault line in America was not between the oppressors and the oppressed, including Jews, but between those with white skins and those with black skins. The rapid decline of American anti-Semitism after 1945 combined with the nation's continuing pervasive racism was proof to blacks, if they needed any such proof, that the condition of American Jews bore little resemblance to that of blacks. . . . American Jews, whatever their problems with prejudice, never experienced anything remotely resembling the enslavement, discrimination, and racism encountered by blacks. . . . **While the major problem facing America's Jews today is maintaining Jewish identity in the midst of affluence, acculturation, and declining anti-Semitism, the major problems facing most blacks are the more immediate ones of economic survival, family breakdown, and continuing racial prejudice. If the comradeship of Jews and blacks as victims was not a mirage in times past, it certainly is one today**

**I disagree:**

Surely one of the enduring arenas of Black Jewish co-operation is the **involvement of rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the work of Rev Martin Luther king jr** —a close friendship betw 2 significant moral leaders **which continues to be available for us to build upon**

-- From both of them we can learn, as Rabbi Art Waskow has put it:

**1. Speaking truth to power.**

**2. Speaking truth to the powerless, empowering them to work for deep social change.**

Rabbi Heschel returned from the March in Selma, Alabama, which demanded voting rights for Blacks throughout America, saying, "I felt as if my legs were praying." And in a lyrical, mystical essay on prayer, he wrote, **"Prayer is useless unless it is subversive"**

Heschel-- Introducing Martin Luther King for his speech to the Rabbinical Assembly, March 25, 1968, ten days before King's assassination.

"Where does God dwell in America today? Is God at home with those who are complacent, indifferent to other people's agony, devoid of mercy? Is God not rather with the poor and the contrite in the slums? ... Where in America do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. ... **Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision and a way. I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King.**"

Kol Haneshamah and the Total Experience Gospel Choir, by our annual evening of prayer and celebration keep this history and these ideals fresh among us. Again, it is a joy to welcome the Choir to this sacred space.

