

JEWES *and the* CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

APPETIZER: RACIAL JUSTICE JOURNEY

INSTRUCTIONS

Begin by reflecting on the following two questions.

When and how did you first become aware of race? Think about your family, where you lived growing up, who your friends were, your viewing of media, or different models of leadership.

Where are you coming from in your racial justice journey? Please share one or two brief experiences.

Once you've had a moment to reflect, share your thoughts around the table with the other guests.

ENTREE: A PICTURE WORTH A THOUSAND NARRATIVES

FRAMING

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it's often never quite as simple as it seems. Begin by viewing the photo below and discussing some of the questions that follow. We recommend sharing more background on the photo after an initial discussion.



Photo Courtesy: Associated Press

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What and whom do you see in this photograph? Whom do you recognize, if anyone?
2. If you've seen this photograph before, where and when have you seen it? What was your reaction to it?
3. What feelings does this photograph evoke for you?

BACKGROUND ON THE PHOTO

This photograph was taken on March 21, 1965 as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. marched with others from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in support of voting rights. This was actually the third attempted march, with the first ending in violence initiated by state troopers, and the second begun and terminated while King sought legal protection for marchers in federal court.

Joining King in the front row is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, known in part for describing his actions that day as “praying with his feet.” Also present in the front row are civil rights leaders John Lewis, Ralph Abernathy, Ralph Bunche, and Fred Shuttlesworth.

This photograph often has a prominent place in Jewish narratives about the Civil Rights Movement, as illustrated by the following passage from “Jews and the Civil Rights Movement” from the Religious Action Center:

During the Civil Rights Movement, Jewish activists represented a disproportionate number of whites involved in the struggle. Jews made up half of the young people who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. Leaders of the Reform Movement were arrested with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964 after a challenge to racial segregation in public accommodations. Most famously, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched arm-in-arm with Dr. King in his 1965 March on Selma.

INSTRUCTIONS

Read the following texts that challenge and complicate the photograph and these narratives. Afterwards, find a chevruta (a partner) and select several of the texts to think about together. Discuss the guiding questions and share any takeaways with the larger group. To what extent does this source make you feel more or less connected to this photograph?

A NOTE ABOUT CHEVRUTA LEARNING

Chevruta literally means “friendship” or “companionship.” It is the traditional rabbinic approach to Talmudic study in which a pair of students analyze, discuss, and debate a shared text. Unlike a teacher-student relationship, partnered learning puts each student in the position of analyzing the text, organizing their thoughts into logical arguments, explaining their reasoning to their partner, hearing out their partner’s reasoning, and sharpening each other’s ideas, often arriving at new insights into the meaning of the text. Spend some time wondering out loud together before referring to the guiding questions. Allow space for each partner to have the opportunity to share a response.



GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How does this source challenge or support what you know or believe about this photograph and Jewish roles in this era?
2. What about this source is emotionally easy or difficult for you to hear? Why?
3. What narratives does this source present? How familiar is it to you? More broadly, how do you make room for and seek out narratives that are less familiar to you?
4. What does it mean to act and be in solidarity (shared struggle) with others?
5. For many, the tenor of conversations and interactions about topics such as those we are talking about tonight has shifted since the election. How do this photograph and these sources push you to respond to your current reality?

TEXT ONE: "HAMANS AND TORQUEMADAS': SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN JEWISH RESPONSES TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1945-1965" | MARC DOLLINGER, 1997

¹By marching in protests, registering voters, or casting ballots for pro-civil rights politicians, northern Jews enjoyed the opportunity to advance a model of pluralist democracy that validated their own rapid rise to the American middle class. ²The civil rights movement reaffirmed the viability of the American Jewish experience and established Jews as a model ethnic minority.... ³Although their position proved naive and often paternalistic, most northern Jews believed that the elimination of racist barriers in the South could offer African Americans their own version of Jewish American success just as it guaranteed a pluralist society amenable to continued Jewish mobility.

TEXT TWO: THE COLORS OF JEWS: RACIAL POLITICS AND RADICAL DIASPORISM | MELANIE KAYE/KANTROWITZ, 2007

¹The "special relationship" has not been either simple or uniformly positive.... ²Yes, African Americans and Jews worked together in the civil rights movement; but Jews who went south for – say – Mississippi Freedom Summer numbered only a few hundred, hardly legions of allies. ³One might as readily characterize the relationship as frequently out of touch, periodically at odds, with both sides often failing to understand each other's point of view. ⁴African Americans are more likely to be focused elsewhere, while a fair number of Jews may be heard swearing that they understand how it is: Weren't we slaves in Egypt? Haven't we suffered? Aren't we just like you?

TEXT THREE: "WHAT SELMA MEANS TO THE JEWS" SUSANNAH HESCHEL, 2015

¹The 50th anniversary of the 1965 march at Selma is being commemorated this year with the release of the film "Selma." ²Regrettably, the film represents the march as many see it today, only as an act of political protest. ³But for my father Abraham Joshua Heschel and for many participants, the march was both an act of political protest and a profoundly religious moment: an extraordinary gathering of nuns, priests, rabbis, black and white, a range of political views, from all over the United States.... ⁴The religious inspiration that led us to Selma continues, and the photograph of my father marching in the front row there — with King, Ralph Bunche, John Lewis, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and Rev. C.T. Vivian — has become iconic. ⁵What a pity that my father's presence is not included in "Selma." ⁶More than a historical error, the film erases one of the central accomplishments of the civil rights movement, its inclusiveness, and one of King's great joys: his close friendship with my father. ⁷The photograph reminds us that religious coalitions can transcend and overcome political conflicts, and it also reminds us that our Jewish prophetic tradition came alive in the civil rights movement. ⁸Judaism seemed to be at the very heart of being American.

TEXT FOUR: “‘SELMA’ GOT IT RIGHT BY LEAVING OUT JEWS” | KATIE ROSENBLATT, 2015

¹[Movie critic Aleida] Snow offers a well-tread recitation of a triumphalist version of black-Jewish relations presented in synagogues and summer camps, complete with mention of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, Jewish involvement in the March on Washington, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. Martin Luther King at Selma. ²This version animates social action in a multitude of Jewish spaces, including youth groups, Hillel-sponsored alternative spring breaks and missions to post-Katrina New Orleans. ³But it’s dangerous for several reasons. ⁴First, it’s a version of history that ignores how the civil rights movement was — rightly — a black-led movement in which only a small proportion of Jews played significant roles. When Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were murdered alongside James Chaney in June 1964, the death of white Jews drew Jewish attention to a movement that had long since been underway. ⁵And it’s worth pausing to ask, as a community: Had Chaney been murdered without Goodman and Schwerner, would that moment have attracted the attention that it did in the Jewish community? ⁶And if not, why? ⁷Second, it’s a version of the Jewish past that continually emphasizes the liberal proclivities of Jews even as they moved up the socio-economic ladder.... ⁸[T]his hasty association erases the enormous amount of contestation that happened within Jewish institutions and communities over Jewish politics.... ⁹We don’t hear about Jewish involvement in racist real-estate practices through redlining and blockbusting. ¹⁰Or about Southern Jewish congregations who censored their rabbis for marching with African-Americans and pleaded with national organizations to leave issues of integration and civil rights to local communities. ¹¹Or about Jews who, segregationist or integrationist, simply did nothing.... ¹²So instead of congratulating ourselves for the actions of a few 50 years ago, we might begin to think about how Jews can amplify black voices in the #blacklivesmatter movement and work for the rights of people of color in this country today.

TEXT FIVE: “NEGROES ARE ANTI-SEMITIC BECAUSE THEY’RE ANTI-WHITE” | JAMES BALDWIN, 1967

¹Finally, what the American Negro interprets the Jew as saying is that one must take the historical, the impersonal point of view concerning one’s life and concerning the lives of one’s kinsmen and children. ²“We suffered, too,” one is told, “but we came through, and so will you. In time.” ³In whose time? ⁴One has only one life. ⁵One may become reconciled to the ruin of one’s own life, but to become reconciled to the ruin of one’s children’s lives is not reconciliation. ⁶It is the sickness unto death. ⁷And one knows that such counselors are not present on these shores by following this advice. ⁸They arrived here out of the same effort the American Negro is making: they wanted to live, and not tomorrow, but today. ⁹Now, since the Jew is living here, like all the other white men living here, he wants the Negro to wait. ¹⁰And the Jew sometimes—often—does this in the name of his Jewishness, which is a terrible mistake. ¹¹He has absolutely no relevance in this context as a Jew. ¹²His only relevance is that he is white and values his color and uses it. ¹³He is singled out by Negroes not because he acts differently from other white men, but because he doesn’t. ¹⁴His major distinction is given him by that history of Christendom, which has so successfully victimized both Negroes and Jews. ¹⁵And he is playing in Harlem the role assigned him by Christians long ago: he is doing their dirty work.

TEXT SIX: PLAYBOY INTERVIEW REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., 1965

¹How could there be anti-Semitism among Negroes when our Jewish friends have demonstrated their commitment to the principle of tolerance and brotherhood not only in the form of sizable contributions, but in many other tangible ways, and often at great personal sacrifice? ²Can we ever express our appreciation to the rabbis who chose to give moral witness with us in St. Augustine during our recent protest against segregation in that unhappy city? ³Need I remind anyone of the awful beating suffered by Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Cleveland when he joined the civil rights workers there in Hattiesburg, Mississippi? ⁴And who can ever forget the sacrifice of two Jewish lives, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, in the swamps of Mississippi? ⁵It would be impossible to record the contribution that the Jewish people have made toward the Negro’s struggle for freedom—it has been so great.

DESSERT: THE CREATION *of* HUMANITY

INSTRUCTIONS

To close your conversation, use the following text from the Mishnah, a compilation of Jewish legal and other sources assembled in the 3rd century. Read the excerpt out loud together:

Therefore, Adam was created alone, to teach us that anyone who wastes one life in this world, the Torah treats them as though they had wasted a full world, and anyone who saves a life, the Torah treats them as though they had saved an entire world. It was also for peace among creation, so that no person could say to another, "My ancestor was greater than yours." . . . Additionally, it was done to demonstrate the greatness of the Blessed Holy One: a person may mint many coins from the same mold, and all the coins look alike. In contrast, the Sovereign, the Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Blessed Holy One mints every human being from the mold of the first human, but no person is identical to their friend.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1. What does this source share about the purpose of creating a single person? How does it mesh with the text we read at the beginning of our time together?**
- 2. What does this text imply about race? What does it teach about similarities and differences among human beings?**
- 3. This source attempts to teach a lesson about the peaceful impact of creating humanity from one person. How does this resonate? What are the other stories we tell for the sake of "peace among creation?"**

