

Looking Back at Jews and the Civil Rights Movement *Dr. Jason Schulman*

1. Jack Bloom, “Journey to Understanding,” *Conservative Judaism*, 1965

“Why did I go? I am not by nature a hero or a martyr. And it would have been easy not to go, simply by not volunteering. I was frightened, I wasn’t convinced that going was the best course of action. No impelling ethical urge or impassioned oratory moved me. I had no history of standing up for Negro rights. I had never before publicly committed myself that way. I don’t like to stick my neck out. But something within me made it impossible for me not to go.”

“During those days the Negro became real, he became an individual....These men brought about a change in me. They radically and for all time altered my image of the Negro. Negroes were no longer an abstraction. They were no longer a sociological problem. They were real....

....The act of going to Birmingham changed me. To some extent I empathized with the Negro; my religious commitment was really relevant and the Negro was my brother.”

“In describing Moses’ role in bringing the Jews out of Egypt, the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, at a rally held in a church, told of Moses’ call to lead his people to freedom. Homiletically he described Moses’ encounter with a bush that could not be consumed, and he told how Moses avoided looking at the bush. God finally forced Moses to look at the bush, and Moses looked at it until the fire of that bush burned within him. With that fire within, Moses took the first steps towards redeeming his people. I think that many of us felt that way about our ‘Birmingham’ experience. Something about those days transformed our brothers’ burning desire for freedom and equality into a flame burning within us.”

2. Miriam Cohen Glickman in Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, 2001

“I guess I need to be clear about my commitment. I had many horrible experiences. There wasn’t anything else I could have been doing at the time that had anywhere near the pull that this did, of helping make the world a better place. I mean what were the alternatives? I could go back and get a 9-to-5 job somewhere. In those days, women were teachers, nurses, and psychologists/ counselors. And Jewish women weren’t nurses. So I had the other two to choose from. I would have stayed forever down there. I finally left because I was forced out. But all of us felt that what we were doing was the most important work that could be done. Nobody said this was a wonderful experience. If you find anybody that told you that, they’ve forgotten.”

3. Charles E. Silberman, “A Jewish View of the Racial Crisis,” *Conservative Judaism*, 1965

“To be sure, a great many individual Jews are deeply involved in the fight for racial justice. All too often, however, it seems as though those Jews who are involved in the racial struggle have no commitment to Judaism, while those who have the commitment to Judaism are rarely involved in the

fight for civil rights. There are notable exceptions, of course—some of them in The Rabbinical Assembly.”

“But to pick a striking example, painfully few of the young Jewish men and women who went to Mississippi last summer had any understanding that what they were doing was in the least connected with their Jewishness, or with the teachings of Judaism; many would have thought you insane had you even suggested that notion. Equally important, the training they received before they went to Mississippi was provided by the National Council of Churches. No Jewish organization played any role in that training, or in the summer project. And yet we mourn the loss of the new generation of Jewish youth, and wonder why they drift away from any connection with Jewish life! Can we find no way by which young Jews can participate in the civil rights movement as Jews?”

“The truth, I fear, is that we Jews are resting too much on past laurels. We think of ourselves as being in the vanguard of the fight for civil rights, for racial equality and justice. And for a long time we were. We take justifiable pride in the fact that, as Heinrich Heine put it, ‘since the Exodus, Freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent.’ But that Hebrew accent, like so many other parts of Jewish life and tradition, is beginning to weaken and fade. The fight for racial justice has radically changed character and direction in the past several years, but we Jews—and by ‘we Jews’ I mean the leadership of the major Jewish religious and lay organizations, not just our benighted rank and file—have not changed with it.”

“The ideology and the approach to race relations developed by most Jewish organizations is inadequate and irrelevant—in some ways, downright misleading—in the present situation...”

“While most Negroes are outside the mainstream of middle-class American life, we Jews are now on the inside.... But because we have not yet fully adjusted to the fact that we are insiders rather than outsiders in American life, we are still terribly insecure about our position. We want racial change, all right but without trouble or turmoil, and without upsetting the existing organizations and institutional arrangements.”

“Several years ago, a group of American Jews visiting Martin Buber in Jerusalem asked him to ‘say something,’ to give them a *D’var Torah* before they left. Professor Buber thought for a while, and then asked, ‘Why are we commanded, *Shema Yisrael!*?... Why *Shema*, hear?’ And he answered his own question: ‘Because this is the most important thing of all: to hear, to listen. We do not listen. So we are commanded to listen, to hear. If only we were to obey this commandment; if only we were to listen...’”

“Buber’s homily is compellingly relevant to the subject at hand: the frequently strained and tortured relations between Negro and Jew. I am afraid that too often we Jews are so busy talking—congratulating ourselves, for example, on our leadership in the fight for civil rights—that we don’t have time to listen to what Negro Americans are trying to say. If we are really listening, we would hear how we sound when we talk to Negroes—and how differently we sound when we talk to whites. We hear Negroes as objects of our benevolence, or as instruments of our charitable purpose. We do not hear them as people—in Buber’s terms, we do not establish an ‘I-Thou’ relationship with them. We do not hear how patronizing we sound, nor do we see how angry Negroes become, when we assure them that we understand how they feel, for we, too, have experienced slavery and persecution.”

“I am not proposing that we blindly follow any and every Negro protest group, whatever its goals and tactics; such a course would be irresponsible on our part. But I am arguing that, far too often, our objection to the means—consciously or unconsciously—masks or rationalizes or comes down to an objection to the end.”

4. Paul Lauter, “Reflections of a Jewish Activist,” *Conservative Judaism*, 1965

“My family, for example, has a Bulletin which reports the activities of family members to all the others. It includes birth, marriage, travel and *nachas* departments. No one, however, thought it of sufficient importance or interest to report on my work in Mississippi last summer or to write of my jailing in Montgomery. Somehow, all of that fell too far outside the periphery of their normal existence for them to see it as relevant, or of general family interest.”

“Or, perhaps, they chose to remain silent about it for other reasons. They could see its importance once it was called to their attention, but they could not focus that attention by themselves. Although ‘they’ do not represent ‘the Jews’ or the ‘synagogue Jews,’ their feelings, I have found, are shared by many loyal synagogue members and regular worshipers.”

“So I end with two homes, something of a visitor in both, but comfortable, and feeling fortunate for it. And in this I feel very much in a central Jewish tradition. For Jews have often discovered value while facing the dangers of living in two worlds, from Canaan to America. Perhaps that part of me in the activist world helps evoke the Jewish part and additionally invest it with values too easily lost in the comfortable pews of suburban temples, though still found in a few important books and in the lives of a few rabbis and other Jews whom I know.”

5. Mark Rudd, “Why Were There So Many Jews in SDS? Or, The Ordeal of Civility,” *Fast Capitalism*, 2005

“This is not to say that there weren’t decent rabbis and Jewish leaders who were active in civil rights. Years later I became aware of Rabbi Joachim Prinz of Temple B’nai Abraham in Newark, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, both side-kicks of Dr. Martin Luther King. They are said to have been very influential, though I didn’t know about them at the time.”

“I am so obviously Jewish that no matter how much carne adovada or fry bread I eat, I’m instantly recognizable as a Jew. I proudly acknowledge the drive for education in Jewish culture which made me want to read about the world and to understand it and to become a teacher. I also recognize that in my social activism I am one of thousands working in the grand tradition of Jewish leftists, the Trotskys and the Emma Goldmans and the Goodmans and Schwerners of the twentieth century. I honor this lineage. As Jews our advantage in the past, though, was that we were outsiders critically looking in; today Jews sit at the right hand of the *goy* in the White House advising him whom to bomb next in order to advance the Empire.”

“To be outsiders in a nation or an empire is not such a terrible thing. Keeping critical and alert has allowed the Jewish people to survive all sorts of imperial disasters over the millennia—the Greeks, the Romans, Islam in Spain (which went from Golden Age to Inquisition in a few centuries), the Crusades, Reformation Europe, the Russian Czars, Nazism. This particular empire is neither the first nor the last to attempt to seduce us to join up. But we’d better not: it’s our job to be critical outsiders, both for our own survival and for that of the planet.”

6. Herbert Wechsler, “Toward Neutral Principles of Constitutional Law,” *Harvard Law Review*, 1959

“The problem for me [in *Brown v. Board*], I hardly need to say, is not that the Court departed from its earlier decisions holding or implying that the equality of public educational facilities demanded by the Constitution could be met by separate schools. I stand with the long tradition of the Court that previous decisions must be subject to reexamination when a case against their reasoning is made....The problem inheres strictly in the reasoning of the opinion, an opinion which is often read with less fidelity by those who praise it than by those by whom it is condemned.”

“For me, assuming equal facilities, the question posed by state-enforced segregation is not one of discrimination at all. Its human and its constitutional dimensions lie entirely elsewhere, in the denial by the state of freedom to associate, a denial that impinges in the same way on any groups or races that may be involved. I think, and I hope not without foundation, that the Southern white also pays heavily for segregation, not only in the sense of guilt that he must carry but also in the benefits he is denied. In the days when I was joined with [NAACP attorney] Charles H. Houston in a litigation in the Supreme Court, before the present building was constructed, he did not suffer more than I in knowing that we had to go to Union Station to lunch together during the recess. Does not the problem of miscegenation show most clearly that it is the freedom of association that at bottom is involved...[?]”

“But if the freedom of association is denied by segregation, integration forces an association upon those for whom it is unpleasant or repugnant. Is this not the heart of the issue involved, a conflict in human claims of high dimension, not unlike many others that involve the highest freedoms...Given a situation where the state must practically choose between denying the association to those individuals who wish it or imposing it on those who would avoid it, is there a basis in neutral principles for holding that the Constitution demands that the claims for association should prevail? I should like to think there is, but I confess that I have not yet written the opinion. To write it is for me the challenge of the school-segregation cases.”

“Having said what I have said, I certainly should add that I offer no comfort to anyone who claims legitimacy in defiance of the courts. This is the ultimate negation of all neutral principles, to take the benefits accorded by the constitutional system, including the national market and common defense, while denying it allegiance when a special burden is imposed. That certainly is the antithesis of law.”

7. Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” *Dissent*, Winter 1959

“I should like to remind the reader that I am writing as an outsider. I have never lived in the South and have even avoided occasional trips to Southern states because they would have brought me into a situation that I personally would find unbearable. Like most people of European origin have difficulty in understanding, let alone sharing, the common prejudices of Americans in this area. Since what I wrote may shock good people and be misused by bad ones, I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or underprivileged peoples for granted and should appreciate it if the reader did likewise.”

“It is common knowledge that vacation resorts in this country are frequently ‘restricted’ according to ethnic origin. There are many people who object to this practice; nevertheless it is only an extension of the right to free association. If as a Jew I wish to spend my vacations only in the company of Jews, I cannot see how anyone can reasonably prevent my doing so; just as I see no reason why other resorts should not cater to a clientele that wishes not to see Jews while on a holiday. There cannot be a ‘right to go into any hotel or recreation area or place of amusement,’ because many of these are in the realm of the purely social where the right to free association, and therefore to discrimination, has greater validity than the principle of equality.”

8. Aryeh Neier, *Defending My Enemy*, 1979

“Jews cannot hide from the Nazis in Skokie. For their own safety's sake, they must give the devil—the Nazis—benefit of law. It is dangerous to let the Nazis have their say. But it is more dangerous by far to destroy the laws that deny anyone the power to silence if Jews should need to cry out to each other and to the world for succor.”

“Jews have been persecuted too many times in history for anyone to assert that their sufferings are at an end. When the time comes for Jews to speak, to publish, and to march in [sic] behalf of their own safety, Illinois and the United States must not be allowed to interfere. The Nazis, I respond to those who ask how I, a Jew, can defend freedom for Nazis, must be free to speak because Jews must be free to speak and because I must be free to speak.”

9. Clive Webb, “Freedom for All? Blacks, Jews, and the Political Censorship of White Racists in the Civil Rights Era,” *American Jewish History*, 2008

“Civil rights activists certainly spoke out in strong condemnation of hate speech and hate symbols such as burning crosses and the Confederate battle flag.

There was nonetheless an important distinction between mobilizing public opposition to the words and actions of white racists and using the power of law to prohibit them. While the moral case was clear, legally and politically the situation was more complex.”

“Black and Jewish groups were especially worried that their attempts to prohibit racist propaganda would prove counterproductive. First, they feared that hate peddlers would actually gain greater

exposure by publicizing themselves as victims of an insidious campaign to deny them their constitutional rights. Second, civil rights activists understood that their own ability to march and demonstrate relied on a broad reading of First Amendment rights by the courts. Restricting speech by white racists that others might find offensive could ironically rebound on the civil rights movement, allowing the courts to apply the same narrow interpretation of the First Amendment to civil rights protesters, seriously curtailing their capacity to protest against racial injustice. For these reasons, civil rights organizations had often eschewed direct challenges to hate speech.”

10. Brief of the Queens Jewish Community Council, *Bakke*, 1977, quoting Edmond Cahn, “Jurisprudence,” *Annual Survey of American Law*, 1954

“It is one thing to use the current scientific findings, however ephemeral they may be, in order to ascertain whether the legislature has acted reasonably in adopting some scheme of social or economic regulation; deference here is shown not so much to the finding as to the legislature. It would be quite another thing to have our fundamental rights rise, fall, or change along with the latest fashions of psychological literature. Today...at least the leaders of the discipline are liberal and egalitarian in basic approach. Suppose, a generation hence, some of their successors were to revert to the ethnic mysticism of the very recent past....What then would be the state of our constitutional rights!”

11. Brief of the National Jewish Commission on Law and Public Affairs (COLPA), *Bob Jones University v. United States*, 1981

“However, notwithstanding its unequivocal position on matters of racial discrimination, the Orthodox Jewish community is concerned by the broad implications in the opinions below which indicate that organizations created by minority groups in pursuit of the Free Exercise of their religions may be denied tax exemption and required to pay taxes, not for doing something illegal, but merely because they refuse to conform to the “policies” of the majority. The loss of tax-exempt status would undermine the economic viability of such organizations and, hence, their ability to exercise their First Amendment rights.”

“For example, many religious bodies have time-honored practices and traditions which prescribe different roles for men and women during worship and related activities, including education. While these distinctions are not perceived by their adherents as discriminatory in purpose or effect, it is conceivable that the lower courts might attempt to interpret the decisions below in the present cases to require the Internal Revenue Service to deny tax-exempt status to any entity which fails to conform to the evolving federal policies on the treatment of women. This could include every orthodox and many conservative Jewish synagogues and yeshivas, the Catholic Church, Moslem mosques, Far Eastern temples and many Protestant churches.”

12. Isaac Toubin, “Recklessness or Responsibility,” *The Southern Israelite*, 1959

“Courage is a habit. It is rarely an unpracticed, instinctive act. If we do not practice courage now, will we be better prepared if fear strikes us? If we do not make a stand when Negroes are the victims, to whom and with what plea will we turn if Jews become the victims?”

13. Brief of the American Jewish Committee, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 1977

“There are a number of reasons why racially discriminatory classifications in professional school admission practices are unsound. The most important of these is their manifest unfairness to individuals. Ineluctably they penalize innocent persons who bear no personal responsibility for historic wrongdoing. Moreover, while assuredly most people of color in this country are culturally ‘disadvantaged,’ not all are, nor are all whites by any stretch of the imagination properly to be considered ‘advantaged.’ Rarely if ever, for instance, have whites from poverty-stricken Appalachia been singled out as a group for preferential educational treatment.”

“Nor has favoritism been bestowed on members of other ethnic groups which credibly can claim to have been subject to generalized societal discrimination—Italians, Poles, Jews, Greeks, Slavs—as a result of which at least some such persons bear the economic and cultural scars of prejudice and thus could be deemed entitled to preference as a form of restitution.”

14. Herbert G. Gutman, “As for the ’02 Kosher-Food Rioters,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1977

“The blackout and the accompanying social disorders among many very poor black and Hispanic New Yorkers soon will become part of contemporary urban folklore.”

“Consider the following newspaper editorial:

“The class of people . . . who are engaged in this matter have many elements of a dangerous class. They are very ignorant. . . They do not understand the duties or the rights of Americans. They have no inbred or acquired respect for law and order as the basis of the life of the society into which they have come. . . . Resistance to authority does not seem to them necessarily wrong, only risky, and if it ceases to be risky the restraint it can have on their passions is very small; practically it disappears. . . The instant they take the law into their own hands, the instant they begin the destruction of property and assail peaceable citizens and the police, they should be handled in a way that they can understand and cannot forget . . . These rioters were plainly desperate. They meant to defy the police and were ready for severe treatment. They did not get treatment nearly severe enough, and they are therefore far more dangerous than they were before...”

“These words have a familiar ring.”

“But the editorial quoted above was not published last week. It appeared in *The New York Times* on May 24, 1902. And the rioters described were not poor disorderly black and Hispanic New Yorkers. They

were poor disorderly immigrant Jewish women, mostly Orthodox and mostly living on the Lower East Side.”

15. “Disorders of ‘02 and ‘77: Readers’ Replies,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1977

“Herbert G. Gutman is comparing apples with oranges. We have had many rioters, all using illegal shortcut methods of protest. The actors in the blackout disgrace of 1977 were stealers.

He should know the difference between protesters and looters. They should not be compared.”

-Harry Levin

“I cannot deny that there was rioting in 1902, but it was for food—not cameras, radios, television sets, cars and other commodities which somehow have become more necessary than food. If the “blackout” rioters are not to be held responsible, those who have made a creed of greed should.”

-Morris Katz

“One must remember that the rioters in 1902 were not provided with any sort of welfare, rent support or Medicaid. These were truly underprivileged, overworked, overexploited people who sought to make better lives for themselves in the alleged new land of milk and honey.

In later years when given the opportunity these same former rioters helped build beautiful neighborhoods, fine schools, hospitals and other much needed philanthropic institutions that contributed to the cultural and ethical growth of our country. I ask that Professor Gutman compare this performance with the principles and performance of today’s rioters and their leadership.”

-Irving Lester

16. Michael Lerner, “Jewish New Leftism at Berkeley,” *Judaism*, 1969

“The Jewish community can rightfully point out that it did not originate the ghettos: in fact, the reason so many Jews own land there is that they were forced to live there when they first arrived. But instead of realizing that the capitalist system has put them in the place of exploiters, just as they were once exploited, and then draw the conclusion that the Jewish community should be in the forefront of the fight against capitalist exploitation, they instead identify with the system, pointing out how they managed to make it within the system.”

“The racism of this reply, with its implication that blacks who cannot make it have only themselves to blame, is obvious to anyone who stops to consider for a second the differences in economic circumstances that faced immigrant families coming to the U.S. when the economy was still expanding from those faced by those who enter a job-market that now has a built-in unemployment factor.”

17. Rabbi Uri Miller, “Prayer at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” 1963

“Enable us to understand

that our society, the American people,

is of one piece—

that when any part of this society suffers,

we all suffer.

May we understand

that he who discriminates is as morally hurt

as the one discriminated against is physically hurt;

that he who is prejudiced

may injure the object of his prejudice,

but he also degrades the society of which he is a part.”