

On Heschel and King, Shabbat January 17, 2015  
Congregation Shearith Israel, Atlanta, GA

As the streets of America began to seethe with racial conflict in the Spring of 1963, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel addressed the First National Conference on Race and Religion in Chicago, Ill. “The First National Conference on Race and Religion was held thousands of years ago” he began. *“the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses....Moses said let my people go that they may serve their God and Pharaoh said I will not let your people go. The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. Today (1963) on college campuses across the south of the United States it is more difficult for a negro student to cross that college campus than it was for the children of Israel to cross the red sea.”*

Of course the Black American Church did not need Rabbi Heschel’s permission to strongly identify with the enslavement of the Children of Israel. But sitting in the front row, not 10 feet from the podium was Dr. Martin Luther King, jr....and for the next and last 5 years of King’s life the friendship forged between them would reflect the power of that first exchange.

Three weeks before King’s assassination Heschel was being belatedly feted by the members of the Conservative Movement’s Rabbinical Assembly at

their annual convention. He had asked that Dr. King be invited to give the major talk in his honor. Heschel introduced Dr. King to the 100's of gathered Rabbis with the following words: "Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision and a way. Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. I call upon every Jew to follow in his path, to heed his word. The whole future of America will depend upon Martin Luther King." Strong words, strong heart, stronger soul.

When does this involvement with the "other" as a Jewish religious act begin? "Ki ger hayetem beretz mitzraim, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt?" Maybe? But the image of the Jew as we know it in public/political space is an invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yes, there is a much longer history of Jewish advocacy for Jews and Jewish communal needs, but not for the common good or certainly not for the aspirations and needs of non-Jews. The prophets do speak in universal language, but in reality we were far from a universal people.

But in the mid twentieth century there stands before us a most powerful example in the image of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Martin Luther King in the Spring of 1965. At that famous confrontation which marked a dramatic turning point in the history of the Civil Rights Movement, Heschel said: "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are

not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship.” A political/social protest was being equated with the most sublime and refined form of spirituality. These simple words of Heschel’s are actually extraordinary.

From there Heschel went on to lead the religious movement against the War in Vietnam together with the Reverend William Sloan Coffin of the Riverside Church in New York City and Dr. King. It was actually Heschel who convinced and cajoled King into speaking out against the War. Not that Heschel restricted himself to the universal; he led the initial stages of the movement to Free Soviet Jewry and he was the pivotal spokesman of the Jewish community in successfully encouraging the passage of Notre Aetate, the Encyclical on the Jews by the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. However, his independent and courageous leadership in the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements are both best known and stand out for their uniqueness.

The creation of this new role for the contemporary Jew reflects his/her comfortableness within the expansive world provided by post WWII democratic governments coupled with the concentration of Jewish population in the United States (and in particular within its major cities). Jews have formed (and dissolved) strategic relationships with “others,” forged alliances that provide for mutual benefit, but

most of all have distinguished themselves (certainly in the 1960's) for their willingness to risk both station and life itself in both defense of other minorities and assertion of the basic rights of those deprived. There can be no doubt that the "silence" of seemingly decent bystanders during the Holocaust influenced this development, but the importance and opportunity of democracy itself remains the major factor.

Heschel understood both the reality and the promise of America and took to the streets to join the protesting masses in challenging and cajoling America to live up "to the promise of its creed: that all men are created equal...." In opposing the War in Vietnam, he coined the phrase "In a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible." And in so speaking, writing and doing, he opened a new door for American Jewry, and particularly for American Jewish youth of that time; an act that has no equal in American or Jewish history.

On June 16, 1963, Heschel sent the following telegram to President John F. Kennedy in response to an invitation by the President to attend a meeting of religious leaders at the White House to discuss the growing racial tensions in the country. It represents a unique example of the change that was then taking place within the American Jewish community:

I look forward to privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow. Likelihood exists that Negro

problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it.

**Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church synagogues have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month's salary toward fund for Negro housing and education. I propose that you Mr. President declare state of moral emergency. A Marshall plan for aid to Negroes is becoming a necessity. *The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.***

Many of us grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust. Pre-1960 we knew few facts about WWII beyond two: millions of Jews had been killed and good people all over Europe looked the other way. As the civil rights struggle began to fill our television screens and our newspapers carried stories and photos of confrontations between hate-filled violent white people and idealistic non-violent blacks, many young Jews made the obvious connection without ever being *instructed* to do so.

But we were *inspired* to do so by two giants of the spirit. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel told us: "One hundred years ago the emancipation was

proclaimed. It is time for the white man to strive for self-emancipation, to set himself free of bigotry.” The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King told us: “The time is always ripe to do right!”

It was now our turn to stand up and be counted. Now we were being called to the ultimate test. Dr. King taught us: "Courage faces fear and thereby masters it. Cowardice represses fear and is thereby mastered by it." Would we put our lives on the line to help end discrimination and violence against African-Americans, or would we become the “good Germans” of our time and simply look the other way.

The advancement of civil rights in America **did** take place in the legislatures and courts of the United States, but it began in the streets of Selma, Montgomery and Birmingham with common people, every-day citizens standing up for what was **right** and **civil**. Leadership in the people’s struggle came from Dr. Martin Luther King for whom I was privileged to work in the summers of 1965 and 66 in Orangeburg, S.C. We young Jews were as moved spiritually by hearing King preach in a Baptist Church as by Heschel in a Synagogue. Truth be told, we did not hear Rabbi Heschel giving sermons. We heard him speaking with his eastern European accent at public rallies **for** civil rights. We witnessed him marching with Dr. King at the front of the line of the famous march from Selma to Montgomer. When Heschel

returned to New York and told us “I felt as if my legs were praying,” we knew where we belonged.

Being a civil rights worker was not without risk, and my classmate at Queens College, Andy Goodman was one of the three boys lynched in the summer of 1964 outside of Philadelphia (The City of Brotherly Love!) Mississippi. Rabbi Heschel’s inspiring words lifted us up and gave form to our innocent youthful spirit. He removed the fear from our hearts.

In this universal arena of civil rights he mixed the religious and so-called secular worlds in his thoughts and spoken word. HESCHEL: "There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: *indifference to evil*. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted. That equality is a good thing, a fine goal, may be generally accepted...What is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of inequality." He found original ways to express the link between Judaism and the civil rights struggle: “God is every man's pedigree. He is either the Father of all men or in no man. The image of God is either in every man or in no man.” And sometimes he used ironic humor to get the point across: “A person who views people on

the basis of the color of their skin has an eye (I) disease.”

The struggle for civil rights remains a poignant and demanding one all over the world. The lesson of the American Civil Rights movement is that “We Shall Overcome!” Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel set in motion a process that became international in scope and will not end because a new tyrant or tyranny arises to threaten us.

It is however a challenge to live in a time without a Heschel and King to guide us, to inspire and focus us. In those years we could still be inspired by Rabbis, Ministers and Priests who were pious advocates of religion on the one hand and the leading social activists of those times on the other. Today many of the religious leaders throughout the world, are filled with self-righteous indignation, which easily turns into disdain for the “other” and then ultimately to violence.

In Jerusalem this past Christmas, the Van Leer Institute sponsored a conference on Heschel and a symposium entitled: “Then and NOW, the struggle for Human and Civil Rights.” An impressive array of scholars from around the world gathered to consider the lasting contribution of Heschel’s teachings and his social activist leadership.

There is an almost mystical power in the similarity of thought between Heschel and King.

Heschel's definition: "A Jew...is a person whose integrity decays when unmoved by the knowledge of wrong done to other people."

King taught: "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it."

Heschel's direction: "To be or not to be" is not the question. How to be and not to be is the question. The true problem is how to survive, what sort of future to strive for. It is the power and the vision of time to come that determines time present.

King's direction: "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

Heschel's demand: "Equality is a good thing...what is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of inequality."

King's demand: "A right delayed is a right denied."

And finally, in conclusion in their words:

King: "The ultimate measure of a (person) is not where he (or she) stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of

challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his or her position, prestige, and even life for the welfare of others."

And Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, charging us today 43 years after his untimely death:

*"A religious man or woman is a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers in himself harms done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair."*