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Abstract

The Civil Rights Movement occurred throughout a substantial portion of the twentieth century, dedicated to fighting for equal rights for African Americans through various forms of activism. The movement had a profound impact on a number of different communities in the United States and around the world as demonstrated by the continued international attention marked by recent iterations of the Black Lives Matter and 'Never Again' movements. One community that had a complex reaction to the movement, played a major role within it, and was impacted by it was the American Jewish community. The African American community and the Jewish community were bonded by a similar exclusion from mainstream American society and a historic empathetic connection that would carry on into the mid-20th century; however, beginning in the late 1960s, the partnership between the groups eventually faced challenges and began to dissolve, only to resurface again in the twenty-first century.

The Complex Relationship between Jews and African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement

Hannah Labovitz | Gettysburg College '21

The Civil Rights Movement occurred throughout a substantial portion of the twentieth century, dedicated to fighting for equal rights for African Americans through various forms of activism. One community that had a complex reaction to the movement, played a major role within it, and was impacted by it was the American Jewish community. The African American and Jewish communities were bonded by a similar exclusion from mainstream American society and a historic empathetic connection that would carry on into the mid-twentieth century; however, beginning in the late 1960s, the partnership between the groups faced challenges and began to dissolve, only to resurface again in the twenty-first century.

The African American community was able to relate historically to the plight of the Jewish people, which fostered a connection between the two groups. During the country's founding and throughout the American slave trade, black people identified with the historic Jewish struggle, relating slavery in the antebellum

American South to that of the biblical Jews in Egypt.¹ They recognized how Jews were able to escape from slavery and hoped the same for themselves, singing songs and hymns such as “Go Down, Moses” in honor of that time.² Jews made this comparison between the Africans and their biblical ancestors as well. Jewish newspapers drew parallels between the Great Migration of African Americans leaving the South and the Jews’ escape from Egypt; this connection may have led certain Jewish press organizations in 1856 to proclaim “on behalf of Judaism that negro slavery should not endure,” additionally pointing out that “the spirit of Judaism... demanded the abolition of slavery.”³ The comparisons between shared historic trauma continued outside of abolitionism and into more contemporary movements. Historian Juan Floyd-Thomas argued that, during the rise of the Zionist movement in the nineteenth century, “black nationalists such as Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and Marcus Garvey used [the movement] as a model for their own ‘Back-to-Africa’ movements.”⁴ The popularization of the Zionists movement in the late nineteenth

¹ Juan Floyd-Thomas, “Between Jim Crow and the Swastika,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 12, no. 1 (2014): 5.

² Michael C. Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘Go Down, Moses,’” Discipleship Ministries, United Methodist Church, 2021.

³ Floyd-Thomas, “Between Jim Crow and the Swastika,” 5; Max J. Kohler, “The Jews and the American Anti-slavery Movement,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 5 (1897): 147.

⁴ Floyd-Thomas, “Between Jim Crow and the Swastika,” 6.

century had inspired a similar movement for African Americans, demonstrating a shared goal between the two communities.

Similarities also arose regarding the codified discrimination and danger the two groups experienced during the early twentieth century. For instance, although the situations varied in severity, the United States segregated both communities into distinct neighborhoods. In 1926, the Supreme Court decision in *Corrigan v. Buckley* made this legal ghettoization possible through a popular housing technique. The technique was characterized by the use of “restrictive covenants,” which scholar Teron McGrew described as “private contracts limiting home sales or rentals for blacks and Jews.”⁵ This drastically limited where both Jews and African Americans could live, forcing them into racially divided communities. Additionally, the term *pogrom*, which usually referred to the state sponsored attacks on Jewish communities in Russia, was also used to describe the racist treatment towards African Americans in the South. In an article from *The Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the country’s most widely circulated black newspapers, one author wrote a review on the struggles of black people in the South; he referred to the job discrimination of black

⁵ Teron McGrew, “The History of Residential Segregation in the United States and Title VIII,” *The Black Scholar* 27, no. 2 (1997): 24.

people that worsened their quality of life as a “cold pogrom.”⁶ The aforementioned legalized economic practices terrorized Black Americans in the South.

Early in the Civil Rights Movement, the mutual understanding of shared hardships motivated collaboration between the two communities. Jews and black people worked together as early as 1909, with the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The organization’s founders included W.E.B. Du Bois, Julius Rosenthal, Lillian Wald, Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, Stephen Wise, and Henry Malkewitz.⁷ Four members of this group were Jewish. While the Jewish founders were not the main force behind the NAACP—that recognition is reserved for Du Bois—they helped to fund and establish the group, which would play a major role in the growing Civil Rights Movement.⁸ The partnership between prominent American Jewish and black leaders continued to be cultivated through the early twentieth century.

This growing alliance and the connections between Jewish people and African Americans in the United States helped to

⁶ Geo S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950), January 22, 1938, City Edition, 10.

⁷ Floyd-Thomas, “Between Jim Crow and the Swastika,” 5.

⁸ Derrick Johnson, “Nation's Premier Civil Rights Organization,” NAACP, 2020.

harness sympathies towards Jews abroad during the 1930s when the Jewish people faced one of their greatest threats at the hands of Adolf Hitler's regime. In 1935, at the annual Nazi rally held in Nuremberg, the party had unveiled new laws which "institutionalized many of the racial theories prevalent in Nazi ideology."⁹ German Jews were excluded from Reich citizenship, prohibited from marrying people of German blood, disenfranchised, and stripped of political rights. The American South inspired Hitler to enact these discriminatory laws, known as the Nuremberg Laws, in 1930s Germany.¹⁰ After the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment but before the codification of the Jim Crow laws, the American South had fewer legal barriers against African Americans that allowed many to ride in the same train car, shop in the same stores, and eat in the same restaurants as their white counterparts. Jews had the same freedoms in Germany prior to 1935. In the 1890s, Jim Crow laws in the South denied African Americans equal rights, eliminating almost all of the social, economic, and legal freedoms they had gained only a few decades prior.¹¹ This systemized and dehumanizing mistreatment of

⁹ Howard M. Lorber, "The Nuremberg Race Laws," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2020.

¹⁰ James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 19.

¹¹ Marshall Croddy, "A Brief History of Jim Crow," Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2020.

African Americans inspired the Nazis, who, as historian James Q. Whitman argued, “took a real, sustained, significant, and revealing interest in American race policies.”¹² Whitman supported this point by explaining that “the Nuremberg Laws were the product of many months of Nazi discussion and debate that included regular, studious, and often admiring engagement with the race law of the United States.”¹³

Although the Nazi regime had not wholeheartedly supported the United States in all ways, the Germans did not hide their respect for American practices. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler praised the American system. Other notable German authors, such as Albrecht Wirth and Wahrhold Drascher, had written endorsements of the United States, describing its founding as “a historic turning point in the Aryan struggle for world domination,” and as “fulfilling the promise of centuries of American racism” in the twentieth century.¹⁴ This praise existed not only in writing, but in public proclamations as well; in speeches given by Hitler and Hermann Göring, the Nazi leadership had praised the Roosevelt administration and the United States.¹⁵ Nazi endorsements of the United States came not only from the top leadership, but also from

¹² Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, 11.

¹³ Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, 29.

¹⁴ Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, 27.

¹⁵ Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, 19.

Germans in general, the most radical Nazi lawyers being eager advocates of the use of American models. Furthermore, Whitman reported that “when Nazi observers looked out on early New Deal America, they saw a country where white supremacy ran deep.”¹⁶ Nazi support for American racism and the Jim Crow laws continued to be broadcasted in Germany throughout the early 1930s. By word of mouth and international reporting, news of the instatement of the Nuremberg laws was also able to reach an international audience in the United States.

African Americans in particular were critical of the fascist regime after learning about the actions of the Nazis. Once news was spread about the cruel conditions in Germany, the historian Clive Webb explained that “many African Americans denounced Nazi antisemitism from the outset.”¹⁷ Even before the start of the war, the NAACP secretary had criticized the antisemitic Nazi “pogroms” against the Jews, publicly condemning their actions.¹⁸ Additionally, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote a powerful article, “The Present Plight of the German Jew,” published in *The Pittsburgh Courier* on December 19, 1936. In his writing, Du Bois explained:

There has been no tragedy in modern times equal in its

¹⁶ Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, 12.

¹⁷ Clive Webb, “The Hitlers in Our Own Country,” *History Today* 69, no. 7 (2019): 19.

¹⁸ “N.A.A.C.P. Secretary Blasts Nazi Pogroms,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition, 1921-1967)*, November 26, 1938: 7.

awful effects to the fight on the Jew in Germany. It is an attack on civilization, comparable only to such horrors as the African slave trade... It is widely believed by many that the Jewish problem is episodic, and is already passing. Visitors to the Olympic Games are apt to have gotten that impression. They saw no Jewish oppression. Just as Northern visitors to Mississippi see no Negro oppression.¹⁹

He made explicitly clear the similarities between a Jew in Germany and an African American in Mississippi. Through this widely read publication, Du Bois was able to publicly criticize the struggles of the Jewish people and compare them to the challenges of African Americans.

In addition to the literature and newspaper publications featuring the cruelties of Germany, those who had fled the oppressions of the Nazi Party shared their stories with African Americans, establishing empathy through communication between the two groups. A considerable number of Jewish professors arrived in the United States and found new careers at historically black colleges throughout the South. Because of the emotional connections between blacks and Jews, there was a “heightened possibility of effective interracial coexistence and collaboration.”²⁰ For example, a Jewish professor of sociology at Tougaloo College

¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Present Plight of the German Jew,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 19, 1936.

²⁰ Floyd-Thomas, “Between Jim Crow and the Swastika,” 7.

in Mississippi, Dr. Ernst Borinski, organized dinners in which blacks and whites sat next to each other—a radical act for the time.²¹ Professors were not the only ones at the university working to create interracial relations. Their African American students experienced relatively analogous conditions to that of the European-Jewish professors during their own upbringings, so they were able to empathize with their struggles. As a result, the students “tended to trust them more than other Whites.”²² The relationship that started with slavery and was strengthened after the Holocaust would carry on into the Civil Rights Movement, peaking during the events to take place throughout much of the 1950s and 1960s.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, activists utilized the horrors of the Holocaust to push their message. As American racism increased after World War II under the “shadow of the Holocaust,” there was a resurgence of comparisons between Nazism and Jim Crow.²³ As part of their campaign for civil rights, black activists aimed to expose the hypocrisies in the United States

²¹ Donald Cunnigen, “The Legacy of Ernst Borinski: The Production of an African American Sociological Tradition,” *Teaching Sociology* 31, no. 4 (2003): 397-411.

²² Floyd-Thomas, “Between Jim Crow and the Swastika,” 7.

²³ Atina Grossmann, “Shadows of War and Holocaust: Jews, German Jews, and the Sixties in the United States, Reflections and Memories,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 13, no. 1 (2014): 101.

and, as Webb explained, “pushed analogies between Nazism and Jim Crow to warn that racism undermined the democratic ideals for which the Allies were fighting.”²⁴ Even in 1958, more than ten years after the end of the Second World War, Martin Luther King, Jr. had delivered a speech at the National Biennial Convention of the American Jewish Congress in which he related the struggles of the European Jews to those of African Americans:

My people were brought to America in chains. Your people were driven here to escape the chains fashioned for them in Europe. Our unity is born of our common struggle for centuries, not only to rid ourselves of bondage, but to make oppression of any people by others an impossibility.²⁵

King had used the comparisons to initiate a call to action to the Jewish audience he was presenting to in order to push them to help in the fight for civil rights.

Jewish progressives also used the post-war climate to push for racial justice. Historians Stephen J. Whitfield and Jonathan B. Krasner argued that, at the end of World War II, “the ethical demands of Judaism were integral to the sermons of Reform rabbis... and the most urgent challenge that they proposed from their pulpits was to help achieve equal rights for black

²⁴ Webb, “The Hitlers in Our Own Country,” 18.

²⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Address Delivered at the National Biennial Convention of the American Jewish Congress,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, May 14, 1958.

Americans.”²⁶ As part of their endeavor towards equality, Jewish Americans created their own slogan, “Never Again,” which was used in both the context of discrimination against Jews and against African Americans. Many Jewish people followed their religious liberalism and strived to ensure that an atrocity like the Holocaust would never happen again. As stated in an article from *The New York Times*, “having suffered much because of their race and religion, blacks and Jews have a special reason to feel passionately about the American dream of equality and individual opportunity. Together they can be agents of conscience in American society.”²⁷ The mutual historic struggle and empathetic connection helped inspire many within the Jewish community to actively support the African American push for equal rights.

At the beginnings of the “Never Again” campaign in the 1950s, many major Reform Jewish organizations wrote resolutions opposing the government’s injustices against African Americans. These groups included the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) and the Central Conference for American Rabbis (CCAR). In 1953, the CCAR, referred to by some as “the voice of Reform Judaism,” drafted a resolution “to reconstitute [President Eisenhower’s] Civil

²⁶ Stephen J. Whitfield and Jonathan B. Krasner, “Jewish Liberalism and Racial Grievance in the Sixties: The Ordeal of Brandeis University,” *Modern Judaism - A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 35, no. 1 (2015): 19.

²⁷ “How — and What — to Overcome,” *The New York Times*, October 16, 1979.

Rights Committee.”²⁸ In the years following, CCAR continued to add to the resolution after being inspired by powerful acts of defiance against racial injustice; they did so after *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, after the Freedom Riders’ journey through the South, and after a surge of volunteer civil rights workers were sent down to the South in 1961.²⁹ In addition, a spokesperson for CCAR made a public statement urging Jews to take part in the Civil Rights Movement. The statement, which was circulated in *The New York Times*, compared “the Jewish problem” to the “Negro problem,” explaining that Jews should understand the struggles of the black community and continue to “condemn racism in any and all forms.”³⁰

Similarly, the URJ drafted resolutions against racism towards African Americans. In 1963, the URJ hosted the 47th Biennial Assembly, which was attended by Jewish organizations with substantial influence over the Reformed Jewish community in the United States. These organizations included the CCAR and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). The ultimate objective of the event was for each of the organizations to urge

²⁸ Ilana Baden, “Civil Rights,” Central Conference of American Rabbis (2020).

²⁹ Baden, “Civil Rights,” Central Conference of American Rabbis (2020).

³⁰ George Dugan, “BACK CIVIL RIGHTS, JEWS ARE URGED: REFORM RABBIS FEAR SPLIT ON ANTI-SEMITISM ISSUE,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), February 8, 1969, 21.

their member congregations to help resolve the racial crisis plaguing the African American community. Specifically, the goals included:

Racial justice in our congregation's administrative policies; racial justice in our congregation's educational, cultural and worship programs; racial justice in our congregation's cooperative relationships with other institutions; and racial justice in the lives of our individual congregants.³¹

The Jewish community recognized the urgency of a far-reaching, thorough plan for racial justice and enacted it to help not only their congregations, but also any other cooperative institutions. The conference set these goals in place in Jewish congregations across the country.

In general, the sect of Reform Judaism has been recognized as being more vocal in its participation in social liberalism; Conservative Jewish congregations may not have been as eager to engage with the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, Conservative and Orthodox rabbis were noted to have “played a much less conspicuous role in both interfaith activities and desegregation.”³² One Conservative leader, Rabbi William Malev, wrote the text *Conservative Judaism* in which he showed his

³¹ Rick Jacobs, 2016.

³² Leonard Dinnerstein, “Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis, 1954-1970,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (1973): 233.

hesitations to joining the movement by noting the danger in the Jewish support for it: “the demagogue and the agitator equate the Jew and the Negro, and thereby separates the Jew from the rest of the community.”³³ This perception was not maintained by all Conservative Jews, but the influence of the Rabbi did impact the perspective of many of his followers.

Although in some cases more Conservative and Orthodox Jewish leaders had shown less interest the movement, this was not the case for all Conservative rabbis. For instance, “in Houston and Dallas... even one of the more reserved rabbis acknowledges, ‘The Jews, of course, take their place with those who advocate desegregation.’”³⁴ Another instance of the Conservative call to action was seen from the notable Rabbi Robert Gordis, “who urged Jews to revitalize their religious life through a commitment to social justice.”³⁵ There were instances of both Conservative and Reform Jewish leaders engaging in social justice for African Americans, but the push for action came primarily from national Reform Jewish organizations rather than Conservative organizations. Furthermore, it may be more difficult to determine

³³ Seth Forman, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being Jewish: Desegregation in the South and the Crisis of Jewish Liberalism,” *American Jewish History* 85, no. 2 (1997): 136.

³⁴ Dinnerstein, “Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis,” 233.

³⁵ Forman, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being Jewish,” 126.

the specific level of practice of the collective Jewish participants in the movement, because in many cases it was not personally addressed by the individuals themselves.

While the push to include racial justice policies for congregations in the United States varied depending on the sect of Judaism, Jewish leadership in the North and the South also held considerably different perspectives on the movement. When it came to joining the movement, more evidence supported the influence of region over sect in how much individuals felt the push to engage with the civil rights. In the South, the Jewish communities would often more closely align politically with the Christians in their regions. For example, “Atlanta is perhaps the most cosmopolitan of Southern cities and some Jews there have been among the most ardent advocates of integration. In more conservative Alabama few Jews have committed themselves.”³⁶ In many cases the rabbis who worked in the South and were at the center of the Civil Rights Movement “hailed predominantly from the North because there were no seminaries in the South.”³⁷

Regardless of where the leadership was from, much more

³⁶ Dinnerstein, “Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis,” 232.

³⁷ Allison Schottenstein, “Jews, Race, and Southernness,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 24: Race*, eds. Thomas C. Holt, Laurie B. Green, and Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 76.

consideration was given to the openly supporting the Civil Rights Movement in the South because of the risk that it posed on the Jewish community. Even though in the region “over 75% of Southern congregations [were] Reform,” which was the congregation of practicing Jews who were prompted to support the movement by the national organizations, there was still an increased caution that the Southern Jews had to consider if they chose to support African Americans in the movement.³⁸ As Whitney M. Young, Jr., executive director of the National Urban League, explained, “the forces at work hostile to the Negro are hostile to the Jew too.”³⁹ Jews in the South were put at a greater risk of discrimination and attacks compared to those in the North, as seen by an increase in synagogue bombings in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁰ Prominent Northern Jewish leader Albert Vorspan, the Director for the Committee on Social Action of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, had responded to these bombings of Jewish institutions in the South by saying, “the Jew is caught up in the storm of the South whether he likes it or not.”⁴¹ Because of this increased threat, historian Allison Schottenstein

³⁸ Dinnerstein, “Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis,” 233.

³⁹ “Negro Leaders Say Anti-Semitism Among Negroes is Declining,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin (New York, NY)*, August 12, 1964: 3.

⁴⁰ Schottenstein, “Jews, Race, and Southernness,” 76.

⁴¹ Forman, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being Jewish,” 137.

explained that the Jewish leadership in the South, acting as spokespeople for the Jewish community, “defended southern Jews for acquiescing to the white southern majority and fought Jewish agencies for pressuring them to join the Civil Rights Movement.”⁴² To protect their congregations, Southern rabbis had to make the decision to place less focus on the movement. Overall, national Jewish organizations placed pressure on all American Jews to play a role in the Civil Rights Movement, but individual rabbis responded differently depending on which region they resided.

While several influential Jewish organizations fought against racial injustice, many Jewish individuals also stepped up and did what they could to help. Their Jewish identity had provided them with a deep understanding of the struggles of African Americans in the United States. Oral histories collected from Jewish volunteers in the 1960s helped to illuminate the reason for the massive influx of Jewish participants in the Civil Rights Movement. Many explained that their participation originated from their “self-interest in beating back hatred that was antisemitic as well as anti-black” and that they were responding to “radical universalism in social justice.”⁴³ The partnership between Jews and African Americans was stronger than ever, which was

⁴² Schottenstein, “Jews, Race, and Southernness,” 76.

⁴³ Samuel G. Freedman, “Mississippi Mitzvahs,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current)*, April 8, 2001: 9.

proven by the high number of Jewish individuals willing to volunteer to help the cause of civil rights. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been quoted in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in a news bulletin published in 1964 saying, “It 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.”⁴⁴ In addition, according to James Farmer, National Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), by 1963 the organization had “substantial numbers of Jews active in our local chapters and active in giving us financial support.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, in *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, author Debra L. Schultz and the Jewish volunteers she interviewed identified the trend that “Jews supported the movement more than any other white ethnic group.”⁴⁶

Jewish Americans played a role in some of the most well-known events of the Civil Rights Movement, including the Mississippi Freedom Summer and the Freedom Rides in buses across the South. At the start of the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964, James Chaney, a Mississippi native volunteer, and

⁴⁴ “Rev. Martin Luther King Lauds Role of Jews in Fight for Negro Rights,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin* (New York, NY), August 12, 1964: 3.

⁴⁵ James Farmer, “Jewish Problem,” November 20, 1963.

⁴⁶ Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 20.

Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, two secular Jewish volunteers from the North, were killed. Even though the two Jewish men were not distinctly religious people, Schwerner had been motivated to volunteer explicitly to “help prevent the spread of hate that had resulted in the Holocaust, an event that had taken the lives of his family members.”⁴⁷ All three had risked their lives to help the black people in Mississippi who were struggling with intense discrimination and disenfranchisement. Goodman and Schwerner became “Jewish Martyrs,” and their death motivated those supporting the ideas of Jewish liberalism to join the cause.⁴⁸ According to data provided by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC), “50 percent of the young people who volunteered from all parts of the United States were Jews.”⁴⁹ This statistic was reiterated in an article from *The Washington Post* written by a volunteer in the Civil Rights Movement. He mentioned that Jewish women “constituted between one-half to two-thirds of the several hundred white women to serve in the civil rights campaign.”⁵⁰ While the influx of Jewish volunteers was

⁴⁷ “The Murder of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner,” Mississippi Civil Rights Project (2020).

⁴⁸ Edward Shapiro, “Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and American Jewish Memory,” *Society* 51, no. 5 (2014): 553.

⁴⁹ “The RAC and the Civil Rights Movement,” in Albert Vorspan and David Saperstein, *Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice: Tough Moral Choices of Our Time* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations Press, 1998).

⁵⁰ Freedman, “Mississippi Mitzvahs,” 9.

good for the movement, the media did not fairly represent the death of the three. Because two of the victims were white, the effort spent investigating the crime far outweighed efforts made to find justice for the other murdered African Americans in the South. One Philadelphia newspaper explained how the President had even gotten involved in the case by sending Intelligence Chief Allen Dulles to the South to investigate, making the point that “Goodman and Schwerner are white, and it was their parents who conferred with President Johnson.”⁵¹ The article continued, explaining that only the parents of the two white individuals killed “called on the President and were assured the Government is doing everything in its power to locate the young men.”⁵² The differentiation between attention given to Goodman and Schwerner compared to Chaney could have caused apprehensions within the black community, leading to some of the small beginnings of tension between the two groups. While the coverage may have led to a bit of a rift between the two groups, it also helped to inspire more volunteers to join the movement and, subsequently, brought about more news coverage on the Freedom Summer in general; therefore, there were significant benefits from the national awareness. Finally, the two murdered Jews’ intention to join the movement was not to take

⁵¹ “Bias Fighters’ Auto Found; Johnson Sends Dulles to Mississippi,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 24, 1964: 5.

⁵² “Bias Fighters’ Auto Found,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5.

away from the black individuals who were leading it, but to help as supporters of equal rights.

In addition to the high number of Jewish participants in the Freedom Summer, Jewish individuals also worked with African Americans and supported them during the dangerous Freedom Rides through the South. The “Interfaith Freedom Ride,” in June 1961, involved Rabbis and black Protestant ministers riding down into the South, ending their journey in Tallahassee, Florida.⁵³ When the activists were in the airport, planning to fly back to their respective homes, they decided to push their agenda for civil rights even further and test racial desegregation practices. A group of the twenty-four mixed-race riders had planned to sit together in an airport restaurant; however, the dining room had been intentionally closed since the clergymen had stepped off their bus.⁵⁴ As an additional form of protest in response to the restaurant closure, they had decided to go on a 24-hour hunger strike. On June 17, the day after their arrival and the hunger strike that followed, these protestors were arrested. Rabbi Israel “Si” Dresner, known as “the most arrested Rabbi in America,” was one of the interfaith riders

⁵³ Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 318.

⁵⁴ “Freedom Riders Seized in Florida,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 1961.

detained, adding another trip to jail to his extensive list.⁵⁵ Rabbi Dresner had continued civil rights activism throughout the 1960s and participated in the Albany movement in 1962, the St. Augustine movement of 1964, and the famous march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.⁵⁶

Rabbi Dresner is just one example of the outspoken Jewish leaders who stood up during the Civil Rights Movement to support their African American allies. For instance, Rabbi Joshua Heschel, an influential leader in the American Jewish community, articulated to many Jews and African Americans the notion that “they had a responsibility for each other’s liberation and for the plight of all suffering fellow humans around the world.”⁵⁷ To show his dedication to this belief, he walked side by side with Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Selma March in 1965.

Additionally, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, another influential Jewish figure, spoke at the March on Washington in 1963, giving the speech titled “I Speak to You as an American Jew.” Within his speech, Prinz addressed the historic connection between African Americans and Jews that strengthened the empathetic relationship

⁵⁵ “Meet the Players: Freedom Riders,” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service (2020).

⁵⁶ Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 553.

⁵⁷ “Heschel, Abraham Joshua,” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute (2018).

that they maintained. He also acknowledged the sympathy and compassion that Jews felt toward African Americans. Prinz explained how the groups shared “a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.”⁵⁸ Prinz was not only addressing the biblical history of the Jewish people, but also their recent history, which he had a deep connection with—he was a Rabbi in Berlin under the Third Reich and emigrated to the United States in 1937, prior to the Holocaust. The Rabbi also stated that in the face of discrimination, “the most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.”⁵⁹ He was a Jewish leader and framed his speech around his background; in doing so, he used his religious platform to push for racial justice, calling out all who kept silent during times of civil unjust, saying all Americans “must speak up and act.”⁶⁰ He did not focus on himself and the struggles of his people, but on what they could be doing to help the African Americans fighting for equality.

As strong as this partnership had become throughout the Civil Rights Movement, international issues posed a threat to its continuation. During the late 1960s, tension in the Middle East

⁵⁸ Joachim Prinz, “I Speak to You as an American Jew,” Washington, DC, March 1963.

⁵⁹ Prinz, “I Speak to You as an American Jew.”

⁶⁰ Prinz, “I Speak to You as an American Jew.”

between Israel and its Arab neighbors, particularly the Palestinians, created a divide between American Jews and African Americans. As outlined by scholar Paul Berman, some in the black community “believed that Palestinian skin tone was darker than that of the Israeli Jews, as if in pigmental confirmation of the proposed new link between Palestinians and African Americans.”⁶¹ In addition, many associated Israel with South Africa, “the land of apartheid,” because it was one of the only countries in Africa to conduct trade with the Jewish state.⁶² Therefore, they were inclined to support the Palestinian cause over Israel, which countered the values of many Jewish Americans. In 1967, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) outraged American Jews after writing an anti-Israel newsletter. Many black Muslim groups, such as the Organization of Arab Students (OAS), asserted that more African American groups would have spoken out against Israeli actions, if it were not for “their concern with Jewish contributions to their organizations.”⁶³ As a result, many Jews retracted their physical support for the Civil Rights Movement. As reported by *The New York Times* in 1979, blacks had “sought attention as the

⁶¹ Paul Berman, “The Other and The Almost The Same,” *Society* 31, no. 6. (1994): 11.

⁶² Berman, “The Other and The Almost The Same,” 12.

⁶³ Lewis Young, “American Blacks and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2, no. 1 (1972): 76.

tamers of the P.L.O. and [Jews] retaliated by withdrawing support from joint social action at home.”⁶⁴

However, not all international issues were cause for tension. For instance, the African American community showed major support for other international Jewish causes, such as the “Save Soviet Jewry” campaign, defending Jews in the Soviet Union who were prevented from practicing their faith.⁶⁵ Many black people saw Soviet Jews as a nationally oppressed minority, similar to their own situation in America.⁶⁶ Issues between the groups arose during the international movements in which it appeared that Jewish people were no longer being persecuted but were instead perceived by many, including the black community, to be persecuting another group. In this regard, the black community was more inclined to support towards the group they saw as persecuted rather than the Jews involved in the matter.

In addition to challenges abroad, one notable rift in this partnership became clear during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teacher’s strike of 1968. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville district of Brooklyn consisted primarily of black and Puerto Rican students, yet about 70% of the teachers were white and, of this number, 50%

⁶⁴ “How — and What — to Overcome,” *The New York Times*, October 16, 1979.

⁶⁵ “How a Quest to Save Soviet Jews Changed the World,” NPR (2010).

⁶⁶ “Soviet Jews, Blacks in Same Boat,” *Milwaukee Star*, August 7, 1971.

were Jewish.⁶⁷ The largest school district in the country, the area was chosen to be a part of an experimental desegregation plan. As a part of this plan, the New York Board of Education removed control from the school district administrators. After a disagreement over the change of leadership, the new governing board attempted to transfer out nineteen union teachers and supervisors. In response, the New York City Teachers' Union, with support from the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), staged a massive strike. The strike lasted thirty-six days; during this time, "1.1 million students were out of school as 54,000 teachers walked the picket lines."⁶⁸ Many in the community had disapproved of the teachers' actions. While those striking were not all Jewish, it was Jews who faced the brunt of the criticism. In response to the strike, "anti-Semitic material [was] circulated in Ocean Hill-Brownsville and in the city's other black neighborhoods... some of it quoting approvingly from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*," a notorious piece of antisemitic propaganda.⁶⁹ Reports conflicted over the cause of the strike; some reported it was initiated because of

⁶⁷ Mario Fantini and Marilyn Gittell, "The Ocean Hill: Brownsville Experiment," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 50, no. 8 (1969): 443.

⁶⁸ Leo Ferguson, "Ocean Hill-Brownsville and the Myth of 'Black Antisemitism,'" *Jewish Currents*, February 12, 2020.

⁶⁹ Jerald E. Podair, "LIKE STRANGERS: The Third Strike and Beyond," in *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 124.

antisemitism against the teachers from black residents of the neighborhood, while others argued that the teachers on strike were only protesting the fact that the school was left “without real authority to achieve its objectives.”⁷⁰ Some even reported the strike as being a way for the Jewish teachers to “emphasize their own whiteness,” differentiating themselves from the rest of the African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the community.⁷¹ In the aftermath, the strongest disapproval against the strike was from the black community, when the NAACP had publicly condemned the actions of the Jewish educators.⁷² The overtly negative reactions to the strike clearly demonstrated a disagreement in values regarding this incident. Even years later, this strike had been described by historians as an event that pulled “blacks and Jews apart.”⁷³

Even before the Ocean-Hill strike, the partnership was not perfect. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the city’s Jewish residents did not extend their full support to their black allies. Even Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the weak partnership between Jews and the African American community, calling for them to recognize the discrimination against blacks in Montgomery. He

⁷⁰ “Local and National NAACP Officials Condemn Strike,” *Crusader* (Rockford, Illinois), October 25, 1968, 1.

⁷¹ Daniel Opler, “Race, Class, and Teachers’ Unions,” *The Radical Teacher* 71 (2004): 5.

⁷² “Local and National NAACP Officials Condemn Strike,” 1.

⁷³ Podair, “LIKE STRANGERS,” 123.

stated: “I want to go on record, and agree that it is not a Jewish problem, but it is a fight between the forces of justice and injustice. I want them to join with us on the side of justice.”⁷⁴ Even Jewish leaders from the North were calling for the Jewish individuals to join the movement. A notable Jewish author and editor, Harry Golden, also urged for the Jews to take part in the boycott. He had even tried to organize a United Jewish Appeals campaign to help drive those boycotting the buses.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, in a city as plagued by racism and discrimination as Montgomery, the Jewish community was more concerned with its own well-being, considering there were only 1,200 Jews in a city of 130,000.⁷⁶ As mentioned above, the trend of Jews not speaking or acting out for fear of their own persecution was common throughout the South.

Many of the Jewish people whose families had lived in the South since before the Civil War were more reluctant than Northern Jews to actively participate in the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, out of fear of being attacked by outspoken racists and a desire to assimilate to the common culture of the region, “a significant portion of southern Jews opposed

⁷⁴ Clive Webb, “Closing Ranks: Montgomery Jews and Civil Rights, 1954-1960,” *Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998): 464.

⁷⁵ “Golden Urges a UJA Drive Established for Civil Right,” *The National Jewish POST and OPINION* (Indianapolis, Indiana), October 25, 1963, 7.

⁷⁶ Webb, “Closing Ranks,” 466.

desegregation, and a few even considered joining anti-Semitic pro-segregation groups like the Citizens' Council."⁷⁷ These characteristics were most common among Jewish people who had family ties to the region. However, there were some Jewish individuals in the American South who had immigrated from Eastern Europe and were active in their anti-racist agenda. Schottenstein revealed that, because they were marked as being different, sometimes "to the extent that some were even accused of being black," many had been more outspoken in their support for the movement than the more established Southern Jews.⁷⁸ In general, there was a divide in the perspective of Northern Jews and Southern Jews, with the exception of Eastern European Jews and a few others, that "in the post-Civil War period southern Jews mostly desired to maintain their whiteness and disassociate themselves from African Americans."⁷⁹ Southern Jews were still more liberal than their white, non-Jewish counterparts, but overall, their participation in the movement was not as active as the Jewish communities in the North.

The antisemitism that caused many Southern Jews to be reluctant to openly join the Civil Rights Movement was not an isolated occurrence; there were reported instances of antisemitism

⁷⁷ Schottenstein, "Jews, Race, and Southernness," 76.

⁷⁸ Schottenstein, "Jews, Race, and Southernness," 75.

⁷⁹ Schottenstein, "Jews, Race, and Southernness," 75.

from African Americans as well. For instance, in 1964 it was reported to James Farmer, National Director of CORE, that a group of black teenagers had “brutally assaulted [some] ten-year-old children as they came out of the Hebrew school.”⁸⁰ This incident had occurred concurrently to moments in the Civil Rights Movement in which Jews had played a valuable role, such as the March on Washington in 1963 and the Freedom Summer in 1964. Occurrences such as the crime at the Hebrew School showed the complicated relations between the two groups. There was a clear correlation regarding the support each group held for each other and the historic and empathetic connections. However, sometimes the partnership did not hold up. Not all Jews and not all African Americans felt as strongly about the connection between the groups as others; to say that the two groups existed in perfect harmony would be an overgeneralization.

Jews and African Americans shared a complex relationship during the Civil Rights Movement. Jews played a substantial role within it, alongside the leadership of the black activists. Some who have written about this partnership believe that the relationship was strongest in the post-war era and into the Civil Rights Movement, because they were linked by similar historical struggles. As the relationship splintered later in the twentieth

⁸⁰ Farmer, “Jewish Problem,” April 30, 1964.

century, other critics viewed this moment as “romanticized and inflated revisionist history.”⁸¹ All in all, this is not a story about white Jews intervening to save the day after experiencing their own challenges, but rather one damaged community doing what it could to help another.

⁸¹ Akinyi Ochieng, “Black-Jewish Relations Intensified and Tested by Current Political Climate,” NPR (2017).

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