

RABBI'S MESSAGE

From Egypt to Warsaw to Selma and back

One week before the nation celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, I was at a conference with about 250 other rabbis and Jewish religious leaders. The conference theme was "Integral *Tikkun Olam*: Exploring New Visions." *Tikkun Olam* is the Jewish concept regarding our responsibility to repair or complete the world. The conference's keynote speaker was Ruth Messinger, president and CEO of American Jewish World Service (AJWS). Messinger has honorary degrees from five major rabbinic seminaries and has received numerous awards for her lifelong career in public service. As president of AJWS, she oversees programs in which hundreds of Jewish volunteers travel to underdeveloped countries to provide assistance. AJWS's mission: "*Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.*" In short, they try to look out for those who may be oppressed in their own countries seeking to help others gain the rights and freedoms we enjoy in the United States.

Included in her remarks, Messinger urged all those present to see the movie *Selma* about the five-day 1965 march in Alabama to bring equal voting rights to African Americans. She also cautioned us not to say, "Hey, Jews were involved in the Civil Rights movement! Why weren't they mentioned in the movie?" Yes, Jewish people played a prominent role in working with African American leaders toward civil rights. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the 20th Century's most respected philosophers, marched arm-in-arm in the front row, demonstrating solidarity, in his words, "I was praying with my feet."



Rabbi Heschel (2nd from right) marching with Dr. King (4th from right) in Selma, Alabama, 1965

I took her advice. I saw the movie, and resisted the temptation to say, "Where was Rabbi Heschel? Where were the Jewish 'freedom fighters' who came to join the cause, including Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner, who, along with African American James Chaney, were murdered for their efforts by the Ku Klux Klan"? Rather than looking for Jewish recognition in the American Civil Rights Movement, my mind went to comparisons of universal oppression. As I watched the movie, seeing human beings publically beaten on the streets for demanding their constitutional right to vote, I thought about my Jewish ancestors being beaten for similarly unjustified reasons. The Hebrew slaves in Egypt and the European Jews during the Nazi years are only two examples in which Jews were tortured in a way that was sanctioned by authorities. Whites who beat and even murdered Blacks in Alabama were protected by the local officials the same way that Jewish oppression was authorized by Pharaoh and Hitler.

The narrative is similar: those in power convince a population that it is acceptable to treat others inhumanly. They justify their barbaric actions with a false mission of morality, using clubs and whips and knives and guns to say that one group – religious, political or racial – is superior to all others. This is the common thread with Pharaoh's Egypt, Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, Mao Tse Tung's China, Al-Qaeda, Hamas, ISIS and others.

As Jews, it is our responsibility to oppose all oppression and value human life. Torah teaches us “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.” (Leviticus 19:16) Our study of Torah and our study of U.S. history can both teach us lessons of humanity. *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of our Ancestors) states, “In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.” (2:5) The Jewish commitment to justice calls on each of us to be that man (or woman) who acknowledges the divinity of all humans. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday can be the kind of Jewish holiday in which we, as Jews, remember all those who work toward freedom and *tikkun olam*, and strive to repair the world as well as we can.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon