

Sources for Week 3: Jews and the Civil Rights Movement

Rabbi Joachim Prinz at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Aug. 28, 1963

I speak to you as an American Jew.

As Americans we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which make a mockery of the great American idea.

As Jews we bring to this great demonstration, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a two-fold experience -- one of the spirit and one of our history.

In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity.

From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say: Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation.

It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder.

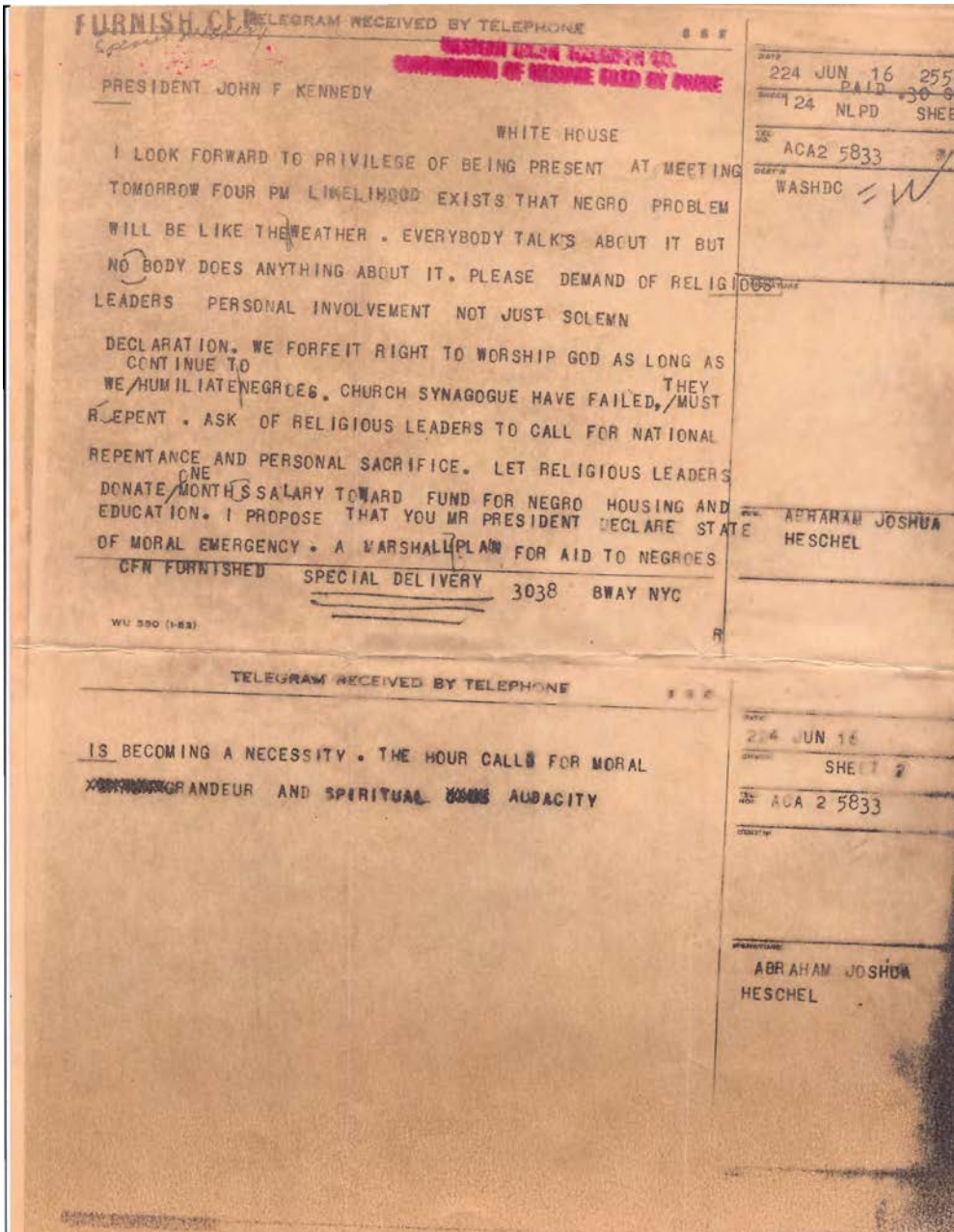
America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the sake of the Negro, not for the sake of the black community but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.

Our children, yours and mine in every school across the land, each morning pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and to the republic for which it stands. They,

the children, speak fervently and innocently of this land as the land of "liberty and justice for all."

The time, I believe, has come to work together - for it is not enough to hope together, and it is not enough to pray together, to work together that this children's oath, pronounced every morning from Maine to California, from North to South, may become a glorious, unshakeable reality in a morally renewed and united America.

Telegram from Abraham Joshua Heschel to President John F. Kennedy, June 16, 1963



Letter from Heather Tobis Booth to her brother, from Ruleville, Mississippi, July 1964

Elizabeth Martínez, ed. *Letters from Mississippi*. (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2002), 172-173.

To my brother,

...Last night I was a long time before sleeping, although I was extremely tired. Every shadow, every noise – the bark of a dog, the sound of a car – in my fear and exhaustion was turned into a terrorist's approach...

"We are not afraid. Oh Lord, deep in my heart, I do believe, We Shall Overcome Someday" and then I think I began to truly understand what the words meant. Anyone who comes down here and is not afraid I think must be crazy as well as dangerous to this project where security is quite important. But the type of fear that they mean when they, when we, sing "we are not afraid" is the type that immobilizes... The songs help to dissipate the fear. Some of the words in the songs do not hold real meaning on their own, others become rather monotonous – but when they are sung in unison, or sung silently by oneself, they take on new meaning beyond words or rhythm... There is almost a religious quality about some of these songs, having little to do with the usual concept of a god. It has to do with the miracle that youth has organized to fight hatred and ignorance. It has to do with the holiness of the dignity of man. The god that makes such miracles is the god I do believe in when we sing "God is on our side." I know I am on that god's side. And I do hope he is on ours.

Jon, please be considerate to Mom and Dad. The fear I just expressed, I am sure they feel much more intensely without the relief of being here to know exactly how things are. Please don't go defending me or attacking them if they are critical of the Project...

They said over the phone, "Did you know how much it takes to make a child?" and I thought of how much it took to make a Herbert Lee (or many others whose names I do not know)... I thought of how much it took to be a Negro in Mississippi twelve months a year for a lifetime. How can such a thing as a life be weighed?...

With constant love,
Heather [Tobis Booth]

Will Maslow, "Negro-Jewish Relations in the North," (Paper presented at the annual meeting of Association of Jewish Community Relations Workers, January 11, 1960.)

...Anti-Semitic outbursts in public are like the iceberg, seven-eighths of whose bulk is concealed below the ocean surface. Our primary concern should be with the underlying attitudes which do not find their way in print.

I see three primary causes for these current anti-Jewish attitudes. Most important of all is that Negroes and Jews are economically and geographically separated. The ordinary Negro's image of the Jew is that of an exploiter, a landlord or rent collector, an employer of domestic labor or of factory help, or a retail shopkeeper, frequently a credit merchant, whose prices are higher than those of stores outside of Negro areas. When the relationship between Negro and Jew is exclusively commercial and where inevitably there is suspicion of exploitation or sharp-dealing, one can understand the distrust, hatred and fear generated by such encounters.

Another potent generator of anti-Jewish attitudes is the new Negro Moslem or Negro nationalist movement. These "Moslems" are of course not followers of Islam and their leaders are not trying to convert their followers to Mohammedanism. This movement is essentially a nationalist drive emphasizing the African background of the Negro and repudiating Christianity as the white man's religion. The cult does not stop here. It has become pro-Arab and openly anti-Jewish.

The third potent generator of Negro anti-Semitism is the increasing numbers, income and influence of Negroes in the North, the consequent emergence of a Negro middle class and the ensuing conflict between the new Negro business and professional man and his Jewish competitor.

Nine million Negroes or half their total number now live outside the 11 states of the deep South. The largest centers of Negro population are now in the North, not the South...

In our Northern metropolitan areas, Negroes are jammed into black ghettos, prevented by anti-Negro restrictions from living where their income would permit. These population clusters, however, allow Negroes to elect city councilmen, judges and district leaders from among their own members and to clamor for an equitable division of patronage. Where Jews have moved from a changing neighborhood, the hold-over Jewish politician or office holder must soon give way to a Negro...

In recent months, a marked anti-Jewish prejudice has been revealed by Negro publicists.

On November 28, 1959, the Amsterdam News insinuated in an editorial that Jews ("one particular racial group") dominated the radiology departments of New York City hospitals and blamed the Hospital Department for planning to deny promotion to a Negro roentgenologist and to fill a vacancy with a member of this same racial group. The editorial concluded by asking the Commission on Intergroup Relations to prevent "this type of racism."...

Simultaneously one senses, although perhaps one cannot prove, an increase of anti-Negro attitudes in the Jewish community. The more important cause for this new fear and hostility is the movement of Negroes into what were formerly Jewish

neighborhoods. The classic example is the Upper West Side of Manhattan in New York City. Central Park West and West End Avenue and, perhaps, the multi-storied apartment houses on the side streets, remain all-white enclaves but everywhere else the neighborhood is changing into a slum. The inevitable deterioration of the public schools, the overcrowding in the streets, the increase in "mugging," all bring about a panic withdrawal, either flight to the suburbs or the more expensive all-white East Side or a determined effort to insulate oneself by sending children to private schools and keeping them off the streets. This new fear and consequent hostility is sensed by Jewish leaders in a new opposition to public school integration on fair housing practice acts and a vast indifference to Federal civil rights legislation relating to suffrage. Judge Leibowitz was voicing this fear when he complained that women in his neighborhood were fearful of walking to their homes from the subway and articulating underlying attitudes when he appealed for a temporary ban on emigration.

Leonard Fein, "The Negro Revolution and the Jewish Community," presentation to the Synagogue Council of America, March 12, 1969.

...[T]he new Negro assertiveness is, in its best versions, an audacious effort to force America to come to grips with real diversity. That is an effort we ourselves have not had the nerve to undertake. If the effort is now successful, we ourselves are likely to be among its unintended beneficiaries, for in an America prepared, at last, for pluralism, there will be more elbow room for Jewish assertiveness.

Lest you think this entirely hypothetical, I enter into evidence the fact that at Cornell University, not many months ago, a thousand of the Jewish students on campus demanded a department of Modern Jewish Studies; the fact that at a dozen high schools around the country, students are complaining that their ancient history courses omit all mention of Palestine; or, more broadly, that the fundamentally patronizing character of the radical Jew who urges the black man to assert his identity but who is utterly uninterested in his own is so patent as to make that position simply not viable. The first hints that Jewish students, and radical Jewish students in particular, were coming to this recognition began to reach me some months ago. By now, the signs multiply almost daily, leading me to suggest that around the country, we have turned a corner, that Jewish students are learning to respect themselves as Jews by listening with care to what their black peers are saying. The lesson they are drawing is a lesson they did not, and, in fact, could not have learned from their own fathers, who have been so wrapped up in making Judaism easy that they have, on the whole, made it trivial as well.

Accordingly, it is a most serious error to confuse the ideological implications of the new Negro cohesiveness from its occasional anti-Semitic manifestations. There is no necessary linkage between the two, and to reject the one because of the other is to throw out the baby with the bath.