

## **If Dr. King Had Lived**

*The Civil Rights movement under Martin Luther King Jr. was the heyday of black-Jewish relations, with a rift growing between the two communities following King's assassination. Had he lived, what would that relationship look like today?*

By Masha Rifkin/JointMedia News Service

Martin Luther King Jr.'s relationship with the Jewish community is well known. Jewish leaders and rabbis filled the ranks of King's closest advisors, collaborators, and confidantes. King's tenure as leader of the Civil Rights movement was marked as the heyday of black-Jewish relations. Then, shortly after his death, those relations cooled. Had King lived, experts say the picture might have been different today.

"In King's era, during the civil rights struggle, there was no segment of the American society that provided as much and as consistent support to Dr. King and to the African American community as did the Jewish community," Rabbi Marc Schneier, founder and president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understand, told JointMedia News Service.

Many leaders from the Jewish community have become closely associated with the Civil Rights movement in their own right. A photograph of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a prominent activist at the time—depicting him walking with King during the Selma march—is now a symbol of Jewish participation in the Civil Rights movement. Of this experience, Heschel later remarked, "When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying."

Stanley Levison, a businessman from New York, was widely regarded as one of King's closest advisors. In an incident that resulted in a national uproar and an FBI investigation, three young activists—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—were lynched in Mississippi following their investigation of a church burning. Schwerner and Goodman were Jewish, while Chaney was black. Stories of mutual collaboration and sacrifice abound.

"King was a leader who emphasized coalitions, particularly coalitions with the Jewish community," Professor Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King Jr., Research and Education Institute, told JointMedia News Service.

Carson credited much of the positive relationship between the black and Jewish communities to King's. "There are different ways of interpreting Christianity in the black community. For King, the essence of Christianity came out of that prophetic tradition. He didn't believe in the gospel of posterity, he believed in the gospel of social justice. That linked him I think to Jewish people who interpreted their own religion that way."

King was also a great friend to the Jewish community. A fervent supporter of Israel, this position served to strengthen his relationship with the Jewish community. Rabbi Matthew H. Simon marched with King at Selma, and is a life member of the NAACP. He told JointMedia News Service, "Dr. King was a great Zionist and a great friend of Israel,

making him beloved in the Jewish community at a time when not all those who were supporting civil rights in America were friends of Israel.”

King frequently spoke out for Israel’s right to exist and against anti-Semitism. At a dinner in Cambridge, Mass., King chided a student for an anti-Zionist remark, saying, “When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You are talking anti-Semitism.”

According to Jonathan Sarna, professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, King spoke out against anti-Semitism “in the ranks of the African American community, even though he knew that it would in some ways cost him among rising group of younger more militant African Americans.”

Finally, King also came out strongly in support of the Russian Jewry movement “in an era when it was still in its infancy,” Sarna told JointMedia News Service.

### **Black-Jewish Relations After King**

Following King’s assassination, black-Jewish relations entered turbulent times, culminating in the Crown Heights riots in 1991.

“The loss of Martin Luther King Jr. created that vacuum; he was the bridge to the Jewish community, and secondly you had the emergence of a more militant wing within the [black civil rights] movement,” said Schneier, who is the author of *Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Jewish Community*.

That more militant wing was known for espousing anti-Semitic beliefs, but Sarna says that even while many members of this wing were actually anti-Semitic, it was also used as a tactic to unseat the leadership developed by Dr. King.

“What we do know is that a younger group of African Americans really used anti-Semitism to delegitimize the more moderate black leadership of Dr. King and others. They basically said ‘you guys were aligned with the Jews and we are pure, we don't need the Jews, we can do it ourselves,’” Sarna said.

“Indeed as some of them became influenced by Muslims, they became truly anti-Semitic, but even those who were not influenced in that way often used anti-Semitism as a tool of winning black support and legitimating the purge of whites from the civil rights struggle.”

While many expected the Crown Heights riots to be the beginning of turbulent relations between the black and Jewish communities, Sarna says they actually marked the end of that.

This was partially due to what Sarna calls “disengagement,” fewer and fewer Jews and blacks living in close proximity as Jews moved to the suburbs, and to a change in priorities.

The rise of a black middle class “coupled with the growth of a Hispanic population moved the issue from an issue about black and Jews to broader issues not only about race, but about a class,” Sarna said. Furthermore, many “blacks moved up with dramatic assistance of Jews. Barack Obama is a poster child of that; he was mentored in Chicago consistently by members of the Jewish community,” he continued. This improvement in the state of the black community served to reduce black-Jewish tensions.

### **Black-Jewish Relations Today**

Larry Jay Tish, a Jewish actor, runs a two-man comedy show with his business partner, Emmy award winner Ron Jones, called the “Black-Jew Dialogues.” Larry and Ron attempt to explore and educate their audience about the commonalities and challenges faced by their two communities. In an interview with JointMedia News Service, Tish described what he sees as a “growing rift” between the two communities.

From his experience, Tish says, this stems from a lack of education and understanding. “A lot of the African American and Jewish kids have no clue of our history together, so they have nothing really to build on,” Tish said.

Yet according to Schneier, the relationship today is quite positive. “Black-Jewish relations is in a state of cooperation, not in a state of conflict,” he said, “African Americans and Jews across America are rediscovering shared values.”

“I’m optimistic, I feel that we are as close today as we were 50 years ago. The relationship went through very turbulent, very difficult, very challenging times, but we have emerged even closer and stronger,” he continued.

### **If King Had Lived**

So, had King not been assassinated, how might his leadership have altered the two groups’ existing relations? According to Simon, King’s involvement would have lifted one of the biggest impediments to strong black-Jewish relations. “He was excellent at helping people realize commonalities,” Simon said.

“The fact that Dr. King could speak at the Rabbinical Convention is telling, in itself. It’s hard to picture, who in the black community could play that role today,” Simon said, referring to the 1968 convention of the Rabbinical Assembly, of which his father was president. The event, roughly a week before King’s assassination, would be one of King’s final public appearances.

Tish believes that King’s relationships within the Jewish community would have kept the doors to dialogue open. “If he wouldn’t have been assassinated, then maybe the rift wouldn’t have been as wide, because those relationships he had would’ve probably maintained and probably still be involved in that dialogue,” he continued, “So I think

with him still around, definitely the dialogue would be happening more, and the lack of it wouldn't have happened so quickly.”

Yet according to Carson, the cooling between the two communities had less to do with King, and more to do with a shift in the issues. Fighting poverty, he said, was the natural next step after the Civil Rights legislation passed. Had King lived, Carson continued, his focus would have shifted to that as well.

“It's easy for people to admire the king of 50 years ago, because that's been kind of romanticized...but it's much more difficult for people to remember that that's not where King ended up. He ended up concerned about class issues. Concerned about poverty, and the gulf between rich and poor.”

According to Tish, there is no animosity between the two communities. Each is just living in parallel to the other. “It's not like we're diverging in different directions. We're side by side, we're just not looking at each other as much.”