



## The Jewish Role in the Civil Rights Struggle Resource Sheet

Excerpt from A. Vorspan and D. Saperstein, *Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice: Tough Moral Choices of Our Time*, UAHC Press: 1998, 203ff:

It is unsurprising that Jews responded powerfully to the fight against racial segregation and discrimination in America. After all, no group in history has been so frequently the victim of racial hatred. As a result, few segments of the American community have invested themselves as deeply as the Jewish community in the struggle for civil rights. As a result of the demands of faith and of enlightened self-interest, Jews served in the forefront of the fight to end racial segregation in education, public accommodations and voting, by playing an active role in the equality struggles of the '50s and '60s, when a strong black/Jewish alliance was at the heart of the civil rights movement.

- When the Mississippi Summer of 1964 was organized to break the back of legal segregation in the most stubbornly resistant state of the Union, 50 percent of the young people who volunteered from all parts of the United States were Jews. In that struggle, white extremists killed three martyrs in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Two of them, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were Jewish; the third, James Earl Chaney, was black.
- Jews helped found and/or contributed substantially to the funds raised by such organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.
- For many years, Kivie Kaplan (a vice-chair of the Reform Jewish movement) was the national president of the NAACP; Arnie Aronson and Joe Rauh Jr. served as secretary and general counsel, respectively, to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR); Jack Greenberg was the executive director of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. These were just a few of the many Jews who played key roles in the civil rights movement. Fittingly, in 1998, President Clinton presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Aronson, an American Jewish leader who, with the legendary A. Philip Randolph and Roy Wilkins, founded the LCCR. For decades, Aronson led Jewish and black civil rights leaders in mapping strategies to pass more than 30 far-reaching civil rights laws.
- From 1910-1940, more than 2,000 schools and 20 black colleges (including Howard, Dillard and Fisk Universities) were funded in whole or in part by contributions from Jewish philanthropist Julius Rosenwald. At the height of the so-called "Rosenwald schools," nearly 40 percent of southern Blacks were educated at one of these institutions.
- Rabbis marched with Martin Luther King Jr., throughout the South, where some were beaten and many were jailed. Prominent among these was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was a spiritual partner to King in the struggle against racism. Many of the leaders of the URJ and CCAR were arrested with Martin Luther King, Jr., in St. Augustine, Florida in 1964 after a challenge to racial segregation in public accommodations.

Indeed, Jewish political leverage contributed to passage of landmark civil rights laws, nationally and locally. Once civil rights and religious groups mobilized the conscience of America against racial evil, changes came at last. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were both drafted in the conference room of the Union for Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center building in Washington, D.C., under the aegis of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (which for decades was housed in the Center). The Jewish community continued as avid supporters of over a score of the most far-reaching civil rights laws in the nation's history, addressing persistent discrimination in voting housing, and employment, against not only women and racial minorities, but the disabled as well. The Reform Movement has been particularly looked to as its various leaders have, since the 1990s, represented the Jewish community on the executive committees of LCCR and the national board of the NAACP (in fact, one of this book's authors, Rabbi David Saperstein, is currently the only non-African American on the NAACP board).