



## **Video Discussion Guide**

### **The Religious Action Center (RAC) and the Civil Rights Movement**

**Video run time: approx. 4 minutes**

#### **Introductory statement to be read before showing the video:**

The Reform Jewish community has been a leader in nearly every major social and political movement of the past 50 years, making Jewish values a reality and significantly influencing the course of history. Our congregations know that talking about our values is not sufficient; we must put them into action.

That is why in 1961, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism) —the umbrella organization to which all of our congregations belong—passed a resolution establishing the Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C., declaring, **“Social Action will succeed to the extent that in our synagogues, individually and collectively, we have the understanding and the daring to make Judaism relevant to the great issues of our time.”**

The “great issue” of the 1960s was the fight for civil rights. Reform Jewish congregants, synagogues, professional and lay leaders, and institutions joined the fight for equal rights by participating in rallies, marches, protests, sit-ins and advocacy to effect change.

The video that you are about to watch illuminates the Reform Movement’s relationship with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and our involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. It is a proud chapter of our Movement’s history, reminding us of the achievements of our past, reflecting the challenges of our present, and inspiring our hopes for the future.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

##### **For Younger Students (4<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> Grade):**

- Can you summarize what you learned from the video?
- Who did you recognize in the photos that appear in video? Could you identify Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? The Dalai Lama? The Pope?
- Is part of being Jewish having the responsibility to try to make the world a better place?
- Can you think of examples from the Torah or Talmud where people stick up for each other?
- Al Vorspan declares, “I was arrested for the crime of having lunch with Rabbi Eugene Borowitz and several Black ministers.” Did you know that in the 1960s, a white person could be arrested for something as simple as having lunch with a black person? How does this make you feel?
- Why do you think the rabbis went to St. Augustine if they knew that they would likely be arrested there? Can you imagine yourself doing something similar?
- What is advocacy? What does it mean to be an advocate?
- Rabbi Saperstein declares that we are trying to create a “more compassionate, more just, more fair, more equitable world for all God’s children.” What does this mean?
- The Religious Action Center was created to help change the world. What do you want to change about our world?



## **For Older Students & Adults (9<sup>th</sup> Grade- Adult):**

### **The Reform Jewish Movement's Involvement in the Civil Rights Movement**

Rabbi Richard Hirsch shares the teaching that God created humans from every color of dust so that no one would be able to say, "the color of my skin is better than the color of your skin."

- How does this teaching relate to the work of the Reform Movement during the Civil Rights Movement?
- What other biblical teachings or stories justify or help to explain Reform Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movement?

Al Vorspan declares, "That's what prophetic Judaism was all about—to fight for civil rights and equal rights."

- What is "prophetic Judaism"? Is Reform Judaism a prophetic tradition?
- Do you believe that fighting for equality is a core value of Reform Jewish identity?

### **The Arrest in St. Augustine**

In the video, we hear the story of Rabbis and lay leaders being arrested in St. Augustine, Florida for acts of civil disobedience protesting racial discrimination. In their cell, they wrote a joint letter entitled "Why We Went," which outlined their reasons for traveling to St. Augustine, knowing that they would be arrested.

- What do you think were their reasons for going? What causes today might inspire you to similar action?
- Why was it important for them to explain their reasoning in writing?

An excerpt from the letter reads:

"We came to St. Augustine mainly because we could not stay away. We could not say no to Martin Luther King, whom we always respected and admired and whose loyal friends we hope we shall be in the days to come. We could not pass by the opportunity to achieve a moral goal by moral means – a rare modern privilege – which has been the glory of the non-violent struggle for civil rights.

We came because we could not stand quietly by our brother's blood. We had done that too many times before. We have been vocal in our exhortation of others but the idleness of our hands too often revealed an inner silence; silence at a time when silence has become the unpardonable sin of our time. We came in the hope that the God of us all would accept our small involvement as partial atonement for the many things we wish we had done before and often. . . ." ([click here](#) to download the full text of the letter)

- Does their reasoning make sense to you? Which reasons do you agree or disagree with? Are any surprising?
- What does it mean that these Rabbis wished to achieve "a moral goal by moral means"? Do you agree that such opportunities come rarely?
- Do you believe that silence is the "unpardonable sin of our time"? How did the creation of the Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C., help the Reform Jewish community avoid this sin?

*The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism:  
Celebrating 50 Years in Pursuit of Social Justice!*



### **The Reform Movement's Involvement in Civil Rights Legislation**

Nearly every major Civil Rights law was [crafted or strategized at the Religious Action Center](#), which housed several important civil rights groups during the 1960s.

- How did the existence of an official Reform Jewish office for social justice facilitate the Reform Movement's leadership on this issue?
- What is the relationship between the advocacy and legislative work that happened in Washington, D.C. , and the protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations that happened throughout the United States?

### **The Current Work of the RAC**

The Religious Action Center currently works on nearly 80 different social justice issues. As Rabbi Israel Dresner explains, "The Religious Action Center doesn't deal in partisan politics. It deals in ethical issues. Issues of social ethics."

- What is the distinction that Rabbi Dresner is making? What is the difference between politics and policy?
- Based on the photographs, what [issues](#) does the RAC work on?

Rabbi Saperstein declares that our task as the Reform Jewish Movement is to be "bearers of flames of justice and weavers of dreams of freedom."

- What does he mean? Are we succeeding? In what ways can we do more? How do we measure success?