



RAC Reads Guide

March: Books One, Two and Three

By: Representative John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell

Prepared by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
and Rabbi Susan Landau, Temple Micah, Washington, DC

Introduction:

The following guide is intended to facilitate conversations about *March: Books One, Two and Three* by Representative John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. We welcome leaders to use this guide to facilitate conversations on one, two or all three of these books.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s remains relevant today, as we continue to make its goals our reality. This graphic novel trilogy brings to life the story of John Lewis, a boy from Pike County, Alabama, who dedicated his life to racial justice and is an enduring national leader, currently serving in the U.S. Congress as the Representative for Georgia's Fifth Congressional District. Readers of *March* get a unique look into Rep. Lewis' faith, passion and humility, while also getting to know the other giants of the Civil Rights Movement, its behind-the-scenes orchestration and the strength of the students and young people who fueled its progress. Through the lens of Rep. Lewis' biography, readers are exposed to an entire chapter of our country's history. The frame of President Obama's 2009 inauguration adds an extra layer to the trilogy's message: a charge to see how far we have come and to never lose sight of how far we have to go.

In order to truly take in all that a graphic novel has to offer, one must read the pictures as well as the words. With the aid of a book such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, even a beginner can learn the basic building blocks of graphic novels (like panels, word balloons and thought bubbles) and start to see how the graphics tell their own story in their own language. This medium demands active engagement from the reader, who in turn can identify with multiple characters and is drawn into the story from many perspectives. This collaboration between Rep. Lewis, his Digital Director & Policy Advisor, Andrew Aydin, and graphic artist Nate Powell, follows in a tradition of civil rights-themed comic books that started with *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1957), and takes the storytelling and the art form to a whole new level.

RAC Reads is a program by the Religious Action Center to encourage reading groups that explore contemporary social justice topics in the context of Jewish teachings and values. The discussion guides are designed for families, congregations and communities. As such, not all of

the facilitation tips and discussion questions may be applicable in all cases. Feel free to take from and adapt the information provided here as you structure your own conversations.

We hope that this guide will spark engaging and challenging discussions among Reform Jews about race and racism within our communities and in the United States. For more information about the RAC's current work on racial justice, visit our website at rac.org/racial-justice.

Facilitation Tips:

Conversations about race, racism, whiteness and privilege can often be uncomfortable. It is important to create a discussion space in which participants are made to feel safe and their perspectives respected. Below are some tips for facilitating conversations about difficult topics:

1. Set group goals for the conversation before it begins. Discuss why participants are in the room, what they hope to learn and what they believe constitutes a productive and successful discussion.
2. Establish community guidelines prior to the start of the conversation. These communally-created rules ensure that everyone agrees on the structure that will make the conversation most successful. They can be formally written down and displayed somewhere in the room, or informally discussed and agreed upon. The facilitator can also model some of these behaviors for the group. Some common community guidelines are:
 - a. "I" statements – always speak from a personal place, using "I" rather than "we," "you" or generalities
 - i. Remind participants that, although this is a Jewish space, that does not mean that there is not a diversity of identities (race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, age, ability, etc.) represented in the room
 - ii. Ex: "*In my experience*, I have found that society perceives me as white." vs "*Everyone* knows that *all* Jews are white."
 - b. Trust intent – trust that no one in the group intends to harm or to offend
 - c. Name impact – inform the group when someone has said something that offends you, and explain why
 - i. Ex: "I found that last statement difficult to hear because my personal experience has been different."
 - d. Step up, step back – be mindful of how much you and others in the room are speaking and try to take a step back when you find yourself speaking too often
3. Provide participants with a paper copy of the discussion questions when they arrive and include space between each question to draft ideas for answers. Give participants several minutes before launching into discussion to organize their thoughts.
4. If you find that a participant seems distressed during the group conversation, ask the others in the group to break off into one-on-one discussions about a particular question and then approach that person individually.
5. Actively facilitate. Don't be afraid to reroute the conversation if it strays too far off track, or to solicit answers from those who have not spoken often.

6. At the same time, encourage participants to explore difficult subjects and to push personal boundaries, even if it means making mistakes. Within reason, allow participants to steer the conversation towards topics that are relevant and important to them.
7. Debrief after the discussion is finished. Ask participants what went well and what did not. Talk about ways to potentially improve future conversations.

Questions for Discussion:

Exploring the graphic novel medium:

1. Why might Rep. Lewis have chosen this medium for his book?
2. What does this medium add to our understanding of civil rights and racial justice?
3. In many ways, the books are about the power of words – nonviolent protest, words codified as law, the powerful oratory of the civil rights giants – and yet the medium cannot exist without the power of image. Where do these two modes of expression (words and images) work exceptionally well together?
4. Consider how the authors and illustrator help us distinguish between words that were sung, spoken, preached, and/or heard over the radio. Which visual cues tell us whether the story is in the past or the present?*
5. Some pages feature a mostly white background, while others are black. Sometimes spreads are particularly busy and full of action, and others are sparse. Some images are vast and others feature close-ups. How does the layout of the page enhance its message?

In Book One:

6. Discuss how Powell uses art between pages 60-63 to relay the passage of time in Rep. Lewis' life and narrative.*
7. Pages 68 and 69 contain almost no words. How does the visual presentation impact you as a reader?

In Book Two:

8. Do you notice the small yet powerful visual difference in the images on pages 17 and 21? What does it add to the message?
9. On pages 79-82, the reader goes from the past, to the present, and then back to the past, with "My Country 'Tis of Thee" sung throughout the transitions, adding multiple layers of meaning. Discuss how and why the authors do this.*
10. On page 123, discuss the powerful image in which Rep. Lewis is punched in the face with the text, "By the end of 1962, you heard people questioning whether SNCC should even BE a multi-racial organization." What do the graphics add to this scene?*

* This question based on questions prepared by the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund

11. On page 130, the authors relay a powerful passage from [Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail](#). Discuss the use of black, white, and gray as well as the page design to brilliantly relay the lighter message of hope from the dark depths of prison.*

General discussion questions:

12. What is the role of religion in Rep. Lewis's life and in his motivation to pursue civil rights? See Book One: page 27 and pages 30-35. Can you count how many scenes take place in churches throughout the book? Why do you think that is?
13. What does the frame of the 2009 presidential inauguration add to the story? How does that feel different to us in this political climate?
14. On page 109 in Book Two, as the Freedom Ride campaign continued, Rep. Lewis writes, "By the end of the summer, dozens more busses carried the nation's daughters and sons into the heart of the Deep South to carry on the work we began. The fare was paid in blood, but the Freedom Rides stirred the national consciousness and awoke the hearts and minds of a generation... We were becoming a national movement." Discuss how and why national movements "become."*
15. Book Two begins where Book One left off with the inauguration of President Obama. It is now 10:17 a.m. and Rep. Lewis is greeted by a colleague in the House of Representatives before heading to the dais. In this opening scene, we're hit with our first metaphor, as Rep. Lewis is told to hurry, to which he replies, "There's no need to hurry – I'll end up where I need to be." What is Rep. Lewis telling us about the pace of social change?*
16. Discuss Dr. King's words to President Kennedy when he says in Book Two on p. 95: "It's difficult to understand the position of oppressed people. Ours is a way out — creative moral, and nonviolent. It is not tied to Black Supremacy or Communism, but to the plight of the oppressed. It can save the soul of America." What criticisms are Dr. King responding to, and what does his response say about social movements led by oppressed people?*