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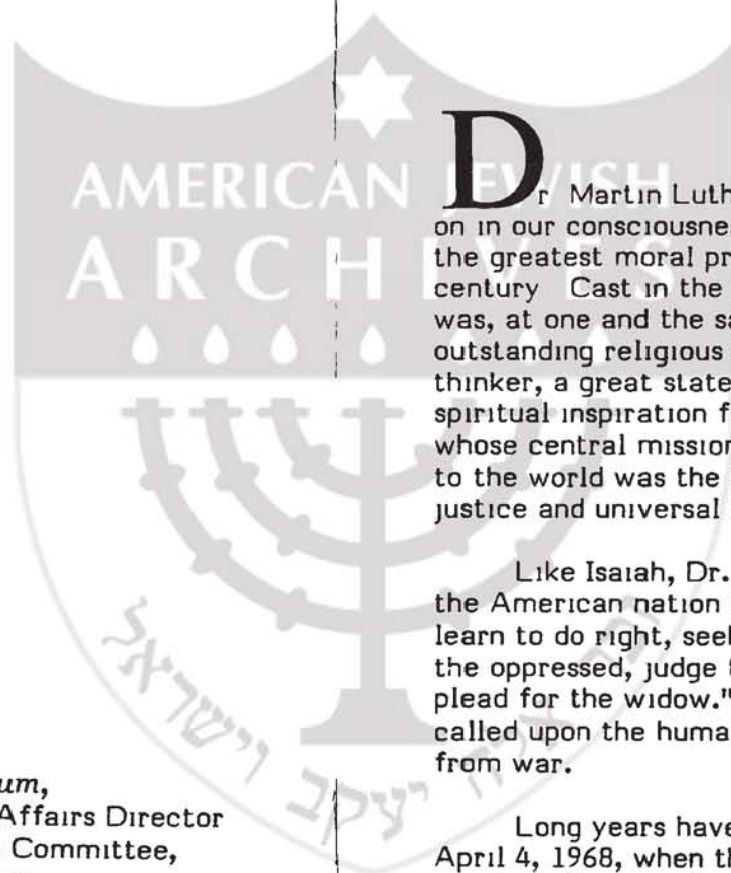
The Moral Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

by RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

For additional copies, write to
THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
Institute of Human Relations
165 East 56 Street
New York, N. Y. 10022

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Institute of Human Relations
165 East 56 Street
New York, New York 10022



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., lives on in our consciousness today as one of the greatest moral prophets of this century. Cast in the mold of Isaiah, he was, at one and the same time, an outstanding religious teacher and thinker, a great statesman, and a spiritual inspiration for ages yet unborn, whose central mission to his people and to the world was the establishment of justice and universal peace.

Like Isaiah, Dr. King called upon the American nation to "cease to do evil, learn to do right, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." And like Isaiah, he called upon the human race to turn away from war.

Long years have elapsed since April 4, 1968, when this American prophet of non-violence became a supreme victim of bloodthirsty violence. Why do so many Americans continue to feel such pain, such a deep sense of loss at his death? What was there about the

Based on an Address by
Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum,
National Interreligious Affairs Director
of the American Jewish Committee,
at the Ecumenical Service
marking the 51st Birthday
of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,
at the Ebenezer Baptist Church,
Atlanta, Georgia, January 15, 1980

life and work, the voice and the vision of this man that made him such a compelling, towering figure of our century? At least part of the answer lies in his capacity to tap the best instincts of every man and woman in his ever-expanding orbit.

THE VOICE AND THE VISION

In January 1963, a National Conference on Religion and Race convened in Chicago. It was the first time in American history that some 70 national organizations, representing Catholics, Protestants and Jews, Blacks and whites, came together to examine the role of religious institutions in ending racial discrimination in the United States. It was my privilege to serve as one of the three organizers of that historic meeting; and as its program chairman, it was my pleasure to invite Dr. King to address a national ecumenical gathering commemorating the centennial of President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

As that conference, which many historians consider the starting point of a new coalition of conscience in our nation, Dr. King told a respectful audience of 1700 religious and civic leaders:

Through our scientific genius, we have made of our nation — and even the world — a neighborhood, but we have failed to employ our moral and spiritual genius to make of it a brotherhood. The problem of race

and color prejudice remains America's chief moral dilemma.

And in words as ringing today as when he first uttered them, Martin Luther King, Jr. enunciated five challenges to America's churches and synagogues, and to all the nation's Christian and Jewish communities.

What were these challenges?

1. *To Enhance the Dignity of the Human Person*

Segregation denies the sacredness of human personality. Deeply rooted in our religious heritage is a conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth...Our Judeo-Christian tradition refers to this inherited dignity of man in the Biblical term the image of God. The image of God is universally shared in equal portions by all men. The tragedy of segregation is that it treats all men as means rather than ends and thereby reduces them to things rather than persons.

The churches and synagogues have an opportunity and a duty to lift up their voices like a trumpet and declare unto the people the immorality of segregation. We must affirm that every human life is a reflex of divinity, and every act of injustice mars and defaces of image of God in man.

2. To Uproot Prejudice

All race hate is based on fears, suspicions, and misunderstandings, usually groundless. The church and synagogue can do a great deal to direct the popular mind at this point. Through their channels of religious education they can point out the irrationality of these beliefs. They can show that the idea of a superior or inferior race is a myth that has been completely refuted by anthropological evidence.

3. To Support Social Justice

A third effort that the church and synagogue can make in attempting to solve the race problem is to take the lead in social reform....They must support strong civil rights legislation and exert their influence in the area of economic justice. Economic insecurity strangles the physical and cultural growth of its victims. Not only are millions deprived of formal education and proper health facilities, but our most fundamental social unit — the family — is tortured, corrupted, and weakened by economic insufficiency. There are few things more thoroughly sinful than economic injustice.

4. To Encourage Non-Violent Direct Action

It is my personal conviction that the most potent instrument to gain

total emancipation in America is that of non-violent resistance. Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it ends up creating many more social problems than it solves. It is immoral because it seeks to annihilate the opponent rather than convert him. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. Non-violence makes it possible for one to rise to the noble heights of opposing vigorously the unjust system while loving the perpetrators of the system.

Love is not the spineless sentimentality which refuses to take courageous action against evil for fear someone might be offended. Love is treating fellowmen as persons, understanding them with all their good and bad qualities, and treating them as potential saints. God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men, and brown men, and yellow men, God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race — the creation of a society in which all men appreciate the dignity and worth of the individual.

5. To Promote Universal Love

A final challenge that faces the churches and synagogues is to lead men along the path of true integration, something the law

cannot do....Court orders and federal enforcement agencies are of inestimable value in achieving desegregation, but desegregation is only a partial, though necessary, step toward the final goal which we seek to realize, genuine intergroup and interpersonal living...Something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right. A vigorous enforcement of civil rights will bring an end to segregated public facilities which are barriers to a truly desegregated society, but it cannot bring an end to fears, prejudice and pride, and irrationality, which are the barriers to a truly integrated society...True integration will be achieved by men who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations.

THE MORAL LEGACY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. IN THE 1980S

The themes Martin Luther King, Jr. sounded in 1963 are equally critical for human survival today: respect for the dignity of every human being; an end to racial, religious, and ethnic prejudice; a deepened commitment to social and economic justice; non-violent-direct action as the truest expression of love and justice; the invisible inner law of universal love which binds all men and women of the human family together as brothers and sisters.

There is an epidemic of dehumanization in the world today. Every continent is shaken by violence, terrorism, massacre, and torture. And where are the voices of conscience to speak out against these acts?

The Bible tells us that each human being is created in the sacred image of God and is therefore of ultimate worth and preciousness. Yet the meaning and value of human life is being ignored the world over. Three million men, women and children were massacred in Cambodia...300,000 Black Christians were murdered by Idi Amin in Uganda...nearly one million Black Christians and animists were exterminated in the Sudan and Burundi; tens of thousands of Black Christian Ibos and Moslem Yorubas died in the Nigerian-Biafran conflict...countless Catholics and Protestants have been murdered in Ireland.

How can the world put a stop to this terrorism and violence?

We honor the moral legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. by joining together in a national and international determination to reject violence and those who advocate violence. We must work to deromanticize all appeals to the use of violence and terrorism as a means of liberation, for from a moral standpoint, no ends can justify such anti-human means. "That which is hateful to you, do not inflict on others" was the first formulation of the Golden Rule, uttered by Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary

of Jesus of Nazareth in first-century Palestine.

We honor the moral legacy of Dr. King by working to curtail racial, religious and ethnic prejudice in our nation and throughout the world.

Prof. Gordon Allport of Harvard University, in his monumental study, The Nature of Prejudice, reported on a series of case studies of the lynchings of Blacks in the South. His researchers found that every lynching was preceded by intensive "verbal violence" against Blacks on the part of racist bigots. The racial epithets pictured Blacks in hostile caricatures and stereotypes, robbing them of their humanity and of any claim to human compassion. "There is an inevitable progression," Prof. Allport wrote, "from verbal aggression to violence, from rumor to riot, from gossip to genocide."

Blacks and Jews have both been the victims of verbal violence that led to physical violence. The nightmare of slavery was made acceptable by dehumanization of Black people. The murder of 6 million Jews in the Nazi Holocaust, was the culmination of centuries of teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood deeply and intuitively the destructive effects of racism and anti-Semitism. He knew that human rights are indivisible; that attitudes and actions which diminish respect for one branch of the human

family are easily turned against another, and that no one is safe from the scourge of hatred.

Dr. King made this point explicitly, in an address to a Jewish audience in May 1958:

...the segregationist makes no fine distinctions between the Negro and Jew. The racists of America fly blindly at both of us, caring not at all which of us falls. Their aim is to maintain, through crude segregation, groups whose uses as scapegoats can facilitate their potential and social rule over all people.

Our common fight is against these deadly enemies of democracy, and our glory is that we are chosen to prove that courage is a characteristic of oppressed people, however cynically and brutally they are denied full equality and freedom.

Because he knew deep in his soul that the demeaning of any group's heritage diminished him and his people, Dr. King was an outspoken foe of Soviet anti-Semitism. Speaking to the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry in 1966, Dr. King denounced the Soviet Government's efforts to destroy the Jewish culture and heritage of Soviet Jews:

While Jews in Russia may not be physically murdered as they were in Nazi Germany, they are facing every day a kind of spiritual and cultural genocide...the absence of opportunity

to associate as Jews in the enjoyment of Jewish culture and religious experience becomes a severe limitation upon the individual. These deprivations are part of a person's emotional and intellectual life. They determine whether he is fulfilled as a human being. Negroes can well understand and sympathize with this problem. When you are written out of history as a people, when you are given no choice but to accept the majority culture, you are denied an aspect of your own identity. Ultimately you suffer a corrosion of your self-understanding and your self-respect.

The same sense of justice that motivated Dr. King to speak out against Soviet anti-Semitism, led him to speak out in support of Israel, and to urge his country to work for peace in the Middle East. In an address to the Rabbinical Assembly of America, just 10 days before his shocking, untimely death, he declared:

I see Israel, and never mind saying it, as one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land almost can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security and that security must be a reality.

As long as he lived, Martin Luther King, Jr. held fast to his vision. In the same speech to the Rabbinical Assembly, he offered this ringing reaffirmation of

the universal struggle to overcome prejudice:

We have made it clear that we cannot be the victims of the notion that you deal with one evil in society by substituting another evil. We cannot substitute one tyranny for another, and for the Black man to be struggling for justice and then turn around and be anti-Semitic is not only a very irrational course but it is a very immoral course, and wherever we have seen anti-Semitism we have condemned it with all of our might.

* * *

On April 5, 1968, the day after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, Morris B. Abram, then president of the American Jewish Committee and a collaborator of Dr. King's from their earliest days in the civil rights movement, issued a statement that movingly expressed a Jewish appreciation of Dr. King's moral legacy:

When the pain and bewilderment is somewhat diminished, those of us who believed with him that the course of America could somehow be changed, that despair could be replaced by hope, and that peaceful solutions can be found to the profound problems that tear our communities apart and perplex us all -- all of us who so believe must reassess our actions and our participation in rebuilding the

country in which we live. From this reassessment must come bold and practical steps that will demonstrate that we care deeply about the conditions of our fellow citizens, and that we are prepared to do more than we are now doing to help heal the wounds in the souls of America -- Black and white.

We all know that the corrosive poverty that afflicts 50 million citizens must be eliminated and that the insurance of a sense of dignity and well-being must be achieved. I urge you to go forth and act in your capacities as an individual citizen, in the traditions of Judaism and in the best interests of the whole country. Let us speak for a segment of white America in declaring our dedication to the principles for which Martin Luther King died.

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Zecher Tzaddik L'vrochoh.

May the memory of this righteous man continue to be a blessing for us all.

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