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51st birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., 15 January 1980

TEXT OF ADDRESS BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM, NATIONAL INTERRELIGIOUS
AFFAIRS DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, AT THE
ECUMENICAL SERVICE COMMEMORATING THE 51ST BIRTHDAY OF
THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AT THE EBENEZER BAPTIST
CHURCH, ATLANTA, GEORGIA, TUESDAY, JANUARY 15, 1980

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Few higher privileges have been accorded to me during my thirty years of public service in the fields of interreligious relations and human rights than the gracious invitation extended to me by that great lady of this generation, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, to address this ecumenical service commemorating the fifty-first birthday of the late, blessed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I accept this invitation as a major gesture of friendship, symbolic of the deep moral, spiritual and historic bonds which have linked together the Black and Jewish peoples in solidarity and mutual respect throughout most of the life of our nation.

By any standards of religious or civic leadership - and certainly when contrasted with the quality of much of the leadership in the world around us - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., lives in our presence today as one of the greatest moral prophets of this century. I say that as a citizen of the twentieth century, as an American, and as a Jew. Martin Luther King was a moral prophet, cast in the mold of Isaiah, who was at one and the same time, a religious teacher and thinker, a great statesman, a mighty spiritual genius 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." (1:16 ff.)

Like Isaiah, he called upon the human race to turn away from war.

"Men shall break their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
Neither shall men learn war anymore." (2:1 ff.)

Like Isaiah, who loved his people Israel, Dr. King was one of the greatest, most beloved, and most trusted friends of the Jewish people throughout

all our travail in the 20th century. That solidarity with Jews was expressed quintessentially in Dr. King's famous letter written in the Birmingham City Jail on April 16, 1963, now a classic.

"It was 'illegal' to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal."

Had Martin Luther King, Jr., been living today, I have no doubt that we would be devoting all our moral and material energies to the task of joining the hands of blacks and whites, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and others in finding new, creative, and non-violent ways to further the causes of love, justice, and reconciliation for the poor and the deprived. He would not have allowed us, I am certain, to fritter away our scarce energies and resources on manufactured or marginal problems of so-called "black-Jewish" tensions as if these were the major problems of America and the world today.

For all these reasons, it is rationally inexplicable, simply dumbfounding, that there is a resistance in some high places to acknowledge the obvious, namely, that the vast majority of American people - Jews and Christians, white as well as black Americans - want a National Holiday commemorating the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am proud of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Congressmen who are Jewish joined the Black Congressional Caucus and other enlightened Congressmen in voting to support the establishment of Martin Luther King Day. None of us should rest until that act of appropriate homage to one of the greatest Americans our nation has given birth to becomes a reality of our national life.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., was cruelly murdered by savage racial hatred on April 4, 1968. Some twelve years have passed since this Prophet of Non-Violence was struck down as a supreme victim of bloodthirsty violence. By all normal reckoning, twelve years is a long period of mourning. Why do we, why does the nations continue to experience such feelings of pain, of remorse, such a deep sense of loss? What was there about the life and work of this single human being, what moral meaning did he embody for us, that continues to inspire us year after year to want to ponder his legacy?

My late, blessed teacher and friend, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched side by side with Dr. King during the historic march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965, to assure the democratic right to vote for all Black Americans, probably said it best. On the evening of March 25, 1968, ten days before he was killed, Dr. King was invited to speak before some 1,000 Rabbis attending the national convention of the Rabbinical Assembly. In introducing Dr. King to these American Jewish religious leaders, Rabbi Heschel said the following:

"Where does the religious leadership in America come from today? The politicians are astute, the establishment is proud, and the market place is busy. Placid, happy, merry, the people pursue their work, enjoy their leisure, and life is fair. People buy, sell, celebrate and rejoice. They fail to realize that in the midst of our affluent cities there are districts of despair, areas of distress.

"Where does God dwell in America today? Is He at home with those who are complacent, indifferent to other people's agony, devoid of mercy? Is He not rather with the poor and the contrite in the slums?

"Dark is the world for me, for all its cities and stars. If not for the few signs of God's radiance who could stand such agony, such darkness?

"Where in America today do we hear a voice like the voice of the Prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred, his leadership of supreme importance to every one of us.

"The situation of the poor in America is our plight, our sickness. To be deaf to their cry is to condemn ourselves.

"Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision, and a way. I call upon every Jew and every American to harken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King.

"May everyone present give of his strength to this great spiritual leader, Martin Luther King."

THE VOICE, THE VISION, THE WAY

What was the voice, the vision, the way of Martin Luther King that made him such a compelling, towering prophet of the 20th century?

In January 1963, a National Conference on Religion and Race was held in Chicago. It was the first time in American history that the national institutions of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, black and whites, some 70 organizations, came together to "concretely examine the role of religious institutions in race relations...and to increase the leadership of religion in ending racial discrimination in the United States." I had the privilege of serving as one of the three organizers of that historic meeting, and as its program chairman, it was my memorable pleasure to extend to Dr. King the invitation to address the first national ecumenical gathering that commemorated the Centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation proclaimed by President Abraham Lincoln.

It was at that national conference - regarded by social historians as the "turning point" in the forging of "a coalition of conscience" in support of the civil rights movement and that laid the foundations for the breakthrough March on Washington later that year, on August 28, 1963 - that the voice, the vision, and the way of Dr. King confronted the moral conscience of the nation.

In a powerful and moving address that brought an audience of 1,700 religious and civic leaders to their feet in an unanimous acclamation, Dr. King declared:

"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."

He then set forth five challenges to the Churches and Synagogues, the Christian and Jewish communities, of our nation:

I - THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

First, "they must make it palpably clear that segregation is morally wrong and sinful. It is established on pride, hatred and falsehood...Two segregated souls never meet in God. 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."

II - UPROOTING PREJUDICE

Second, "Another thing that the churches and synagogues can do to make the ideal of brotherhood a reality is to get to the ideational roots of racial 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. Then can show that Negroes are not innately inferior in academic, health, and moral standards, and that they are not inherently criminal. The churches and synagogues can say to their worshippers that poverty and ignorance breed crime whatever the racial group may be, and that it is a tortuous logic to use the tragic result segregation as an argument for its continuation."

III - 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 become increasingly active in social action outside their doors. They must take an active stand against the injustices and indignities that the Negro and other non-white minorities confront in housing, education, police protection, and in city and state courts. 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."

IV - NON-VIOLENT DIRECT ACTION

Fourth, "the Church and Synagogue are also challenged to instill within their worshippers the spirit of love, penitence, and forgiveness as we move through this period of transition. This is necessary for both oppressor and oppressed alike.

"This is why it is my personal conviction that the most potent instrument the Negro community can use 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. It is helping people with no thought of receiving anything in return. It is a willingness to go the second mile and to forgive seventy times seven in order to restore the broken community.

"I believe that this is the type of love...that will cause us to enter the new age which is emerging without the fatigue and poisonous drain of bitterness...We will not seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice. Nor will we seek to substitute one tyranny for another. We will be imbued with the conviction that a philosophy of black supremacy is as injurious as a philosophy of white supremacy. 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.

V - UNIVERSAL LOVE - THE INVISIBLE INNER LAW

"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 achiev-

ing segregation, but desegregation is only a partial, though necessary, step toward the final goal which we seek to realize, genuine intergroup and interpersonal living. Desegregation will break down the legal barriers and bring men together physically but 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. These dark and demonic responses will be removed only as men are possessed by the invisible inner law which etches on their hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformations. True integration will be achieved by men who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations."

THE MORAL LEGACY OF DR. KING IN THE 1980S

As we look across America and throughout the world today, we have a renewed appreciation of how prophetic and contemporary was the voice and vision of Martin Luther King for the human condition today. The themes he sounded are as critical for human survival in 1980 as they were in 1963 - the dignity of every human being, uprooting the roots of 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 running amok in the world today. There is not a continent on the earth that is not devastated by violence, terrorism, massacre, and torture. Crime and violence against persons and property have soared in the United States. A recent study of "Violence, Non-Violence, and Struggle for Social Justice," prepared for the World Council of Churches, declares that "violence today has become demonic in its hold on human life. In the life of some nations and among many severely oppressed peoples, it seems more like an addiction than rational behavior."

It is evident that we live in an age of violence and terror. It needs to be

said at once that there is also much generosity, caring and compassion and that the United States Government and the American people have been the most generous nation in the history of mankind in providing food, clothing, medical care and shelter for the suffering peoples of the world. But that generosity is paralleled, in fact, overshadowed by a growing callousness to human suffering and pain, and threat to human existence.

Twice this past year, I went on a fact-finding mission to the major refugee camps of the Vietnamese boat people, Cambodian refugees, ethnic Chinese, and Laotian Hmong tribesmen. I saw first-hand the vast pain and suffering that this dehumanization leads to -- people turned away cruelly from country after country, a world that stood by indifferently for years and allowed sixty percent of the boat people to drown, the incredible callousness to the genocidal massacre of some 3,000,000 Cambodians and the present death of thousands through hunger and disease. Where was the world when 300,000 black Christians were murdered by Idi Amin in Uganda? Whose voice was to be heard when nearly one million black Christians and animists were destroyed in the Sudan and Burundi, tens of thousands of black Christian Ibos and Moslem Yorubas in the Nigerian-Biafran conflict? Who really cares that day after day countless Catholics and Protestants are murdered in Ireland through terrorism and violence against innocent people? Who worries over the fact that nearly 50,000 Lebanese Christians and Muslims have been killed? Who lost sleep when Jewish school children were murdered in cold blood by PLO terrorists in their classrooms in Maalot in Israel?

At the center of the human crisis today is the fundamental depreciation of the meaning and value of human life. In theological terms, the Biblical affirmation that each human life is created in the sacred image of God and is therefore of ultimate worth and preciousness is being assaulted and battered from every side.

A CALL TO A NEW HUMANISM

Dr. Martin Luther King perceived the gravity of this erosion of belief in the dignity of human life, and he sought to call us to a new commitment. Christians and Jews and all people of good will can best honor his moral legacy to all of us if we would undertake now a massive effort to establish "a new humanism" in America and on a global basis that seeks to restore the Biblical and democratic values of the infinite worth and preciousness of each human life that must be appreciated as end in itself and never as an object of somebody's project or program.

REJECT VIOLENCE

Second, we can honor the moral legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King if we join together in a national and international attempt to foster an attitude of scorn and contempt for the use of violence and for those who advocate the use of violence. We must work to deromanticize all appeals to use violence and terrorism as a means of liberation, since from a moral standpoint, no ends can justify such anti-human means.

If there were any doubts about the destructive consequences for human lives that such random violence and terrorism pose, place yourself in the position of the American hostages in Iran and think of the hundreds of human beings who have been summarily executed without any due process by Ayatollah Khomeini's fanaticism. Think, too, of the thousands of innocent civilians in Afghanistan who are being cruelly, savagely destroyed by the blitzkrieg of the Soviet Union. "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.

A culture of violence in the world assumes apocalyptic dimensions when you consider the madness of the arms race and the proliferation of nuclear weaponry in the world today. The United States alone has a nuclear stockpile equivalent to 615,385 Hiroshimas which means that we have the capacity to destroy the present world population 12 times over. The Soviet Union has at least that same nuclear kill-power, and is racing to surpass us. Unleashing the warheads now possessed by the United States or by the Soviets could bring fatalities ranging from 50 to 135 million people in either one of our nations' civilian populations.

It was no rhetorical flourish when a Baptist clergyman recently declared, "We are the first generation to be told that we may be the last."

That peril is compounded by the knowledge disclosed by Dr. Theodore Taylor in his study, "Nuclear Theft," that an atomic weapon would not be impossible for a guerilla group of terrorists to construct with just over 13 pounds of plutonium. It is believed that more than 4,000 pounds of plutonium were shipped in the United States last year and nobody knows how much of that material was lost in transit or production. How fatal could be the consequences for any one of us were such nuclear capabilities to fall into the hands of fanatic groups, an atomic Ayatollah, a Colonel Qaddafi, the Red Army, the Red Brigade, the Bader Meinhof band, the PLO, the IRA, the FALN?

Dr. Martin Luther King understood that potential threat to humanity when he chose the course of militant non-violence. In March 1965, Dr. King declared:

"The vast majority of Negroes in the United States feel that non-violence is the most effective method to deal with the problems that we face ...If moderation means slowing up in the move for justice and capitulating to the whims and caprices of the guardians of the deadening status quo, then moderation is a tragic vice which all men of good will must condemn. If by moderation we mean moving on through this tense period of transition with wise restraint, calm reasonableness, yet militant action, then moderation is a great virtue which all leaders should seek to achieve."

Given "the absolutely catastrophic nature of nuclear war," we must ask in this spirit of Dr. King whether our Government and all the nations of the earth have done enough to restrict their sales of nuclear reactors to unstable countries and to countries of uncertain political ideology. It is a central moral issue, articulated dramatically by Dr. King during his lifetime, that Congress help America - especially in face of the current tensions with the Soviet Union and in the Middle East - to develop finally a rational approach to arms sales as well as to the intensification of simultaneous universal disarmament measures. The very survival of the human family depends on such measures taken vigorously here and in concert with other nations.

Third, we will honor the moral legacy of Dr. King if we will work to curtail the resort to 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, carried out 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" by racist bigots against blacks. The racial epithets reduced blacks to hostile caricatures and stereotypes and emptied them of their humanity, 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 been singularly the victims of such verbal violence that led to physical violence. The oppression of slavery was the nightmarish institutionalization of dehumanizing black people. The Nazi holocaust was the culmination of centuries of such teachings of contempt against Jews and Judaism, resulting in a cultural and political atmosphere

which supported the destruction of six million Jewish men, women, and children because German society was suffused with images of Jews as sub-human (untermenschen.)

Dr. Martin Luther King understood deeply, intuitively the destructive effects of racism and anti-Semitism. On September 28, 1967, he issued an official statement in behalf of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, declaring:

"The SCLC has expressly, frequently, and vigorously denounced anti-Semitism, and will continue to do so. It is not only that anti-Semitism is immoral - though that alone is enough. It is used to divide Negro and Jew, who have effectively collaborated in the struggle for justice. It injures Negroes because it upholds the doctrine of racism which they have the greatest stake in destroying.

"I have myself directly attacked anti-Semitism within the Negro community, because it is wrong. I will continue to oppose it, because it is immoral and self-destructive."

When the Chicago Conference on New Politics, organized by Marxist radicals, introduced the newest form of anti-Semitism, namely, seeking obscenely to equate Zionism with racism, Dr. King was equally forthright and outspoken:

"I think it is necessary to say that what is basic and what is needed in the Middle East is peace. Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all of our might to protect its right to exist, its territorial integrity. 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.

"Peace for the Arabs means the kind of economic security that they so desperately need. These nations are part of that third world of hunger, of disease, of illiteracy. As long as these conditions exist there will be tensions, there will be endless quests to find scapegoats. ...Some Arab feudal rulers are no less concerned than U.S. oil companies for oil wealth and neglect the plight of their own peoples. The solution will have to be

found in statesmanship by Israel and progressive Arab forces who in concert with the great powers recognize that fair and peaceful solutions are the concern of all humanity and must be found."

It is gratifying that Mrs. Coretta Scott King reaffirms those convictions when she declared on December 3, 1979, in New Orleans

"I strongly support the State of Israel Bond Drive because I know that as the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel represents an oasis of social progressivism in a volatile and unstable part of the world. This fact alone means that all Americans concerned with world peace and social decency have a moral obligation to support the survival, security, and prosperity of Israel."

And, Mrs. King added, "Equally I know that Jewish support of Black Americans' struggle for human rights is not just history, but an ongoing commitment today and in the future. And I look forward to working with you in our common struggle for social justice in the years to come."

The Jewish community has been equally forthright and outspoken in its numerous public condemnations of racism against the Black people of America. At the time of the march from Selma to Montgomery, a critical turning point in the struggle of the civil rights movement to achieve the right to vote for Black Americans, Morris B. Abram, then president of the American Jewish Committee, sent a telegram to President Lyndon B. Johnson, on March 10, 1965, the day after Alabama State troopers brutally clubbed black marchers. The telegram said the following

"Mr. President, The American Jewish Committee shares your outrage at the shameful exhibition of brutality on the part of state and local police officers in preventing a march of Negro citizens in Selma, Alabama. All people of goodwill in America and around the world recoil at the use of tear gas, clubs, and whips directed at Negroes demonstrating for the right to vote. We urge that you do all in your power to prevent the repetition of such events and to protect Negro citizens of Selma who have no other protection. We also applaud your directive to the Justice Department to intervene in the proceeding now pending in the Federal Court to enjoin Alabama officials from interfering with the right of Alabama citizens to demonstrate peaceably in support of the right to vote."

Between March 10th and 25, 1965, Jewish organizations summoned all

their chapters from throughout the country to participate in the Selma march, chartered planes to bring their people to Alabama, rabbis stood in the rain day and night and submitted to imprisonment in acts of solidarity with Dr. King against racism and for the liberation of black Americans. They joined in a two-hour meeting with President Johnson, who then made his historic address on March 15, 1965, before a Joint Session of Congress declaring, "We Shall Overcome."

After the tragic assassination of Dr. King, the Jewish community joined with Christian leaders in organizing the Interreligious Committee Against Poverty (April 8, 1965), the Martin Luther King Memorial Fund for Love and Justice (April 9, 1968), and joined in the Poor People's March in Washington (May 18, 1968), the last project of Dr. King "to make the reality of American poverty visible, to dramatize the fact of human misery in our affluent midst and thus awaken the conscience of America from its slumber." Similar cooperation continued down through the 1970s, including the establishment on May 8, 1974, of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Forest in Israel, as "a symbolic gesture of remembrance and respect, so that, on each anniversary, the Dr. King tree-planting will grow and grow, as may the memory of his good deeds in this world."

This record is cited not for reasons of Jewish self-congratulation, but as a positive response to the important statement made by Mrs. King in her December 1979 talk in New Orleans during which she said:

"This award is of special significance to me because it reaffirms my belief that despite all the talk about polarization between the black and Jewish communities, those of us who have struggled together during the civil rights movement know that the bonds of solidarity between us are far stronger than the media have been suggesting.

"Still, however, we have a job to do in educating impressionable young people in both our communities who may be too young to remember the rich heritage of cooperation and trust we share."

Fourth, we will honor the moral legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King if we will intensify our cooperation to promote social and economic justice in America and in other parts of the world. Dr. Leo Cherne, the economist, has recently forecast that the next ten years will be "a decade of danger"

for America as a result of the energy crisis, continued inflation, recession, unemployment, the decline of the dollar, growing turmoil overseas, the threat of confrontations with the Soviet Union.

While Dr. Cherne concludes on a cautiously optimistic note to the effect that "the intensity of the dangers will provide the urgent incentive for a turnaround toward economic health and future growth" for the American economy, clearly the next five to eight years will find the middle class feeling economic stringency. And it goes without saying that potential disaster could await the 27 million Americans who live in poverty, and another 35 million Americans who are called "the near poor."

What is true for white Americans will also be true for black Americans, but only more so. According to a special report in U.S. News and World Report (May 14, 1979) entitled, "Blacks In America: 25 Years of Radical Change," significant progress has been made by better-educated and more-skilled members of the black community, who have carved out successful careers in the professions, technical fields, and in skilled crafts and trades. ("Out of a total black work force in 1978 of 10.5 million, some 1.2 million earned their living in professions and technical fields, compared with 262,000 in 1958. There were 927,000 black skilled workers - 9 percent of the black work force - up from 378,000 or 6 percent of all black workers in 1958.")

Ironically, the report says, this progress has been overshadowed by "the deepening economic plight of a hard-core minority ..whose lack of education, training and motivation keeps them pinned down in poverty and despair." According to Labor Department figures, black unemployment, particularly among the young, is higher today than in the 1960s. In April 1979, 11.8 percent of the black work force - 1.4 million people - was idle, 2.4 times the white rate.

Such a condition of economic decline is ripe for what Dr. Seymour Martin Lipset of Harvard University calls "class politics." As the various groups in American society begin feeling the frustrations and insecurities of the economic pinch, there is an historic tendency in America for such groups to look for a scapegoat, a simple easy answer, a villain who can at once explain why people have difficulty surviving in the richest nation in the world. (In Weimar Germany, which suffered horrendous inflation and

unemployment, there emerged "the stab-in-the-back" theory, and "the Jews" were held responsible for all the ills of Germany - a fertile ground which Hitler was able to till in his murderous ways.)

Regrettably, some better educated and higher status blacks have played "the class politics" game and have resorted to scapegoating the Jewish community through anti-Semitic and anti-Israel statements. Jewish leaders have made it clear that they will stand against inflammatory attacks, and will defend openly the legitimate and fundamental interests of their people.

At the same time, Jewish leaders have declared in an official statement that they will continue to make strong efforts to keep the Jewish community in the battle against poverty and discrimination in American life and against any manifestations of racism. One veteran Jewish civil rights leader, Dr. Murray Friedman, put it this way:

"The growth of inflation and continued recession strike hardest at the poor, who are disproportionately black. It is morally reprehensible to take out our displeasure at those who have acted so irresponsibly on the socially maimed. Apart from anything else, a society that tolerates high levels of unemployment, provides poor education and opportunities for youth, is an unstable one and ultimately dangerous for Jews and all Americans."

The Jewish leaders have made clear their readiness to cooperate in social and economic justice in these words:

"We will continue to cooperate with those in the black community who fight for peace and justice in the Middle East. We cannot work with those who would succumb to Arab blackmail on the energy crisis. We cannot work with those who, failing to differentiate between the Palestinian Arabs and the PLO, give support to terrorism by legitimizing the PLO.

"We will continue to cooperate with the black community in the campaign for full employment.

"We will continue to cooperate with those in the black community who fight for fair housing, integrated quality education, health care, and equitable solutions to inflation and the energy crisis."

On April 5, 1968, the day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, Morris Abram, then president of The American Jewish Committee and a collaborator with Dr. King since the earliest days of the civil rights movement, issued a statement that movingly expressed a Jewish appreciation

of the moral legacy of Dr. King's voice, his vision, and his way. Mr. Abram wrote.

"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."

Zecher Tzaddik L'vrochoh - May the memory of this righteous man - the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - continue to be a blessing for all of us.