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ADDRESS TO THE  
QUEENS BLACK-JEWISH PEOPLE TO PEOPLE PROJECT

Golden Center, Queens College, New York

May 7, 1989

Assemblywoman Marshall, Assemblyman Hevesi, President Kenney, my distinguished colleagues and rabbis, and my good friend Rabbi Moskowitz, and in particular, my cherished friend and model on what it means to work on Black-Jewish relations effectively, Dean Ernest Schwarcz: I must begin this brief presentation this evening by telling you, if you will indulge a personal reference, that while this is a poignant moment -- and it should be a poignant moment -- for me it is an especially comforting moment. Last Thursday, I was invited to be the keynote speaker at a national day of prayer in the Pentagon. First of all, Washington needs a lot of prayer, and the Pentagon has a special place for praying deeply and intensely. But why I feel it is a special comfort and privilege to be here this evening, to hear and to discuss all the suggestions about Black-Jewish tensions, both real and imagined, is that I received a warning before I walked into the Pentagon. I don't know if any of you have ever gone into the Pentagon, but I was warned by a friend that once you walk in there you may never come out again. The building is so massive, a city in itself, that there are moments when I thought the only way one moves around here is to jog, and I am in no condition to do that. So just coming out of the Pentagon alive and intact and surviving that experience was a consolation for me; and to come here this evening is a very comforting act.

Those of you who may know something about my work and my interests over the past thirty years know that I have an obsession about truth telling. Wherever it came from--whether from my mother or father or religious school--I have come to the conviction that the greatest compliment that people can pay to one another is not to dissemble, not to say smooth, easy words when the feelings and the intentions are the contrary.

I want to start by telling you one of the most truthful things that I can say. That it is among the most authentic privileges of my life to share a platform this evening with Congressman John Lewis, because the life and the career of John Lewis is not only the past of Black-Jewish relations at its most glorious and most meaningful encounter. It is a model and a beacon for what Black-Jewish relations ought to be, must be, in the foreseeable future. I talked with one of my colleagues who is the director of our office in Atlanta; who is well-known to Congressman Lewis; and who is a long-term dear friend of mine--Ms. Sherry Frank. She has been active in working in Black-Jewish relations in Atlanta, Georgia and she said to me, "Marc, you ought to know that John Lewis has been probably the most physically beaten man who has labored in the Civil Rights movement." John Lewis, as a young man, helped organize ten million Black voters, to bring about through peaceful, non-violent means, a legal democratic process: the legal emancipation of Black citizens into full, responsible status in this society.

Somewhere along the way, it seems to me that especially the young people among us must ask themselves: What is this Freedom Summer observance really all about? It's not part of our history; it's not part of our experience; and I think if we are really honest with each other, Black young people, Jewish young people, and White Christian young people say: Talking about Freedom Summer is almost like talking about the Civil War. To some it



may be like talking about the Roman Empire, a piece of past history which may have no immediate relevance to us today. I hope that will not be the occasion after this observance and this reflection this evening, especially after we hear Congressman John Lewis speak about his role and his experience in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.

My own experience during the 1960s led me to an awareness of the depth, of the bondedness, of the common cause of Blacks and Jews in American society and, indeed, throughout many other parts of the world. As was mentioned, during the 1960s one of the highlights I had as Program Chairman of the National Conference on Religion and Race was the privilege to invite Dr. Martin Luther King to address the first national ecumenical audience of Christians and Jews, Blacks and Whites, ever held until that time in Chicago in February of 1963. Most people told us--the Catholics, the Protestants and the Jews who had organized together with Black leaders--that it could not happen; that people would not turn up to hear Martin Luther King, a preacher from the South.

We expected something like 500 people. Seventeen hundred people turned up for that meeting. It was the first national ecumenical platform that Martin Luther King ever addressed. It was the first time that a Roman Catholic Cardinal joined with a Rabbi--Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschell--Protestant ministers, Black and White together, to declare to the nation, "Let my people go!" And I found out during the course of that meeting that it became clear there was a conscience in the country that cared about justice; that cared about civil and political liberties for Black people and brown people and Native Americans, as well as for Jews and Christians. A coalition of conscience emerged out of that Chicago meeting.

And it was during part of that meeting, in some discussions with Dr. King and others, that the beginning of the idea of a march on Washington took place. And the March on Washington succeeded because of Black leadership and determination and what Dr. Martin Luther King and his aides represented; namely, the inclusiveness of Americans; the "loving brotherhood of America," as he called it; and the determination to stand heart in heart, hand in hand, as brothers and sisters under God, to turn this nation around. And a quarter of a million people turned up, and they weren't all Black. Probably three-quarters of the people who turned up for the March on Washington were White Christians and Jews who understood that Black people had suffered enough indignities; that what was happening to them all over the South--and in many parts of the North--was a flagrant violation of everything that the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution of the United States and the Biblical values which Jews and Christians share together, in terms of the sacred image of every creature created by God; and that that indignity could no longer go on.

And so it was Christians and Jews, under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, who became the prophet Isaiah of this nation; who spoke of justice; who spoke of caring for the hungry, the poor and the needy; that this nation was turned around by virtue--not of separation; not of alienation; but the building of a powerful bond of mutual respect, of mutual caring and mutual trust. When Dr. Martin Luther King was first thrust into jail in Birmingham--and John Lewis will tell you more about this than I can--and it became clear that White racist, segregationists, including law enforcement officers, were determined to break him down, and break the back of the Civil Rights movement--it happened that on the very day on which he was put into jail and was abused and beaten with electric rods,



the first telegram he sent out was to a group of Reformed rabbis meeting at that time in Cincinnati saying that "my rights are being violated. I need the help of my Jewish brothers and sisters. Please come here to testify and bring me out of this prison!" And literally, within twenty-four hours, sixteen rabbis put everything aside, left the meeting, came to Birmingham, and demanded that he be released. And the power of the hatred and the alienation -- not only the racism, but the anti-Semitism -- was so great that those local law enforcement officers cast the sixteen rabbis into prison with Martin Luther King and used electric prods on them and beat them and abused them. And out of that common bond of awareness of the magnitude of the hatred and the alienation from society--a hatred that made no distinction between Blacks and Jews--grew a kind of bond that became unbreakable throughout the course of the whole Civil Rights movement.

That's the message of what Freedom Summer is about. This is not a ritual observance. We are not trying to make an icon, some kind of false statue of something which was external; an accident that happened. The Schwerner, Goodman and Cheney episode was part of an historic movement that was founded in conscience; founded in history; founded in the deepest idealism of Christians and Jews, Black and White, who knew that we were all equally sacred children of God, or none of us had any place in the creative order; that all of us stood together in the face of hatred and alienation and exploitation, or that none of us would be safe.

Well, we live in a time which has passed by, twenty-five years ago, and the agenda has changed. There is a Black agenda, there is a Jewish agenda, as there is a Protestant agenda and a Catholic agenda. The issue for America is how we can come to the table, each of us to raise the issues which are of deepest concern to us, which engage our

conscience, which affect the lives of our families and the future, and expect to get a reasonable hearing and, where possible, a loving caring response. Blacks are deeply concerned, and have a right to be, even in the face of the extraordinary progress that has been made. I don't think that any one will deny the fact that it is a tribute to the Civil Rights movement that there has emerged, over the past twenty-five years, a very sizable Black middle class in America which has entered into the mainstream of society on many indices of social progress.

But the Black community poses still a major conscience issue for the United States. No one who walks through the ghettos of America, who sees the underclass, who sees young Black children, Hispanic children and others having their lives literally destroyed by drugs and crack and crime and violence, can say that that has nothing to do with me. Let them deteriorate in their ghettos; that has nothing to do with me. Because if we are not aware, we ought to be aware of the fact that crack knows no border; it will not remain confined to ghettos; it will not simply destroy the lives of young Blacks and young Hispanics.

My wife is a criminologist who has recently published what I think is a major book. In the process of writing her book on the future of crime in America, she went out to Silicon Valley in California where the most advanced science and technology in America is being applied to defense instruments for the security of the country. She found that many of the personnel in the most advanced defense plants--high technologists, high scientists--were high on crack and cocaine. This is an epidemic which reaches into every aspect of our lives. We have a common challenge before us. It is a challenge which Blacks and Jews, Blacks and Whites, Christians--all of us in society--must come to terms with, and do



everything possible in an effort to join hands with our political and civic leaders to prevent this plague which can be seen as great as the Bubonic Plague in destroying the future of young lives in this country. In order to be able to deal with the massive problems of jobs and housing and education and family breakdowns which affect many of us, you will not put those coalitions together and be able to function if there continues to be underground resentment and underground hostility and, above all, underground monsterizing of one another. It is one of the tragedies of the 20th century that one rarely gets time to talk about.

Whatever happens between Blacks and Jews in our country, with all the stresses and tensions and international conflicts there is in the world today there is what I call an epidemic of dehumanization. When the President of Iraq can call upon a nation to kill Americans and the French and British regard that as conventional political rhetoric, there is something wrong in the world. When, in a war between Iran and Iraq, nearly two million people are destroyed, half of them children beneath the age of fourteen, and a government, a responsible government, uses chemical warfare to wipe out in one day 5,000 people who are mostly Kurds; when the United Nations virtually avoids the issue; that's dehumanization. When a million young Black people are destroyed in the Sudan -- not only by starvation and hunger, but as a result of a civil war between the North and the South -- and there's relative indifference to that struggle, then something is happening in the conscience of the world about the dignity of human life.

We have before us a massive human challenge. It is a challenge to redeem again the sacred value of life. It is to restore the Biblical responsibility that all of us share together; that we are brothers and sisters under God, and have social responsibility for



creative work; that we are responsible for the events of history; and that we must look forward to a time-- what we call a Messianic age -- in which there will be an end to war and bloodshed, and poverty and hatred and misery; a time when there will be universal respect for one another, love and caring for one another.

Let me conclude by telling you that Congressman John Lewis is not only a model of a commitment to those values and that mutual respect. He lives that every day of his life now in Atlanta, Georgia and the halls of the United States Congress. When the President of the United States went to Bitburg John Lewis was among the first to say there was something obscene about paying tribute in a cemetery where Nazi stormtroopers are buried. When a delegation of American congressmen went to the Soviet Union for five days of meetings with Soviet parliamentarians, Congressman John Lewis got up to make a speech before the leaders of the Soviet Parliament and insisted on the human rights of Jews and others--Christians who had been suffering the denial of human rights. John Lewis also made a special plea for Soviet Jews who had been oppressed and persecuted because they were Jews, saying that as long as there is a single Jew who is oppressed, "We are all Jews, and Jews must be allowed to leave the Soviet Union, and I say that to you as a veteran of the Civil Rights movement." He was the only congressional leader to receive applause from members of the Soviet Parliament.

So when Congressman John Lewis wanted to mark the 20th anniversary of the Voting Rights Bill with a march to Selma, Blacks went with him, but Jews marched with him to Selma as well because they loved and trusted and respected him. When he went to protest against the Nazis and the Klan who were beating up young Blacks, Jews were among the first to join him and stand at his side, because he is of the tradition and the role

of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, who gained such respect and love out of his commitment to the Civil Rights movement, but his heart was large enough to understand the pain and suffering of Jews. He understood about the Holocaust; he understood the difficulties of Israel in a very complicated situation; he understood the problems of the Soviet Jews. And because he understood us, he did not have to ask us. Martin Luther King simply had to lift his phone and we would march anywhere he asked us, because we loved him and trusted him and knew that he was our brother.

Congressman John Lewis is such a prophet, and I will tell you that thousands of Jews would march to the end of the earth with him to relieve the suffering of South Africans, as Jewish congressmen have done together with him and the Black Caucus in Congress; would march to the end of the earth with him to relieve suffering and the pain of Black people, and other people who suffer the denial of their human rights anywhere throughout the world. He is the model of the future of Black-Jewish relations, as Martin Luther King is our common moral legacy of what Blacks and Jews at their best were over the past twenty-five years, and for whose sacrifice Goodman, Schwerner and Cheney gave their lives. May their memories live forever as a blessing for all of us.