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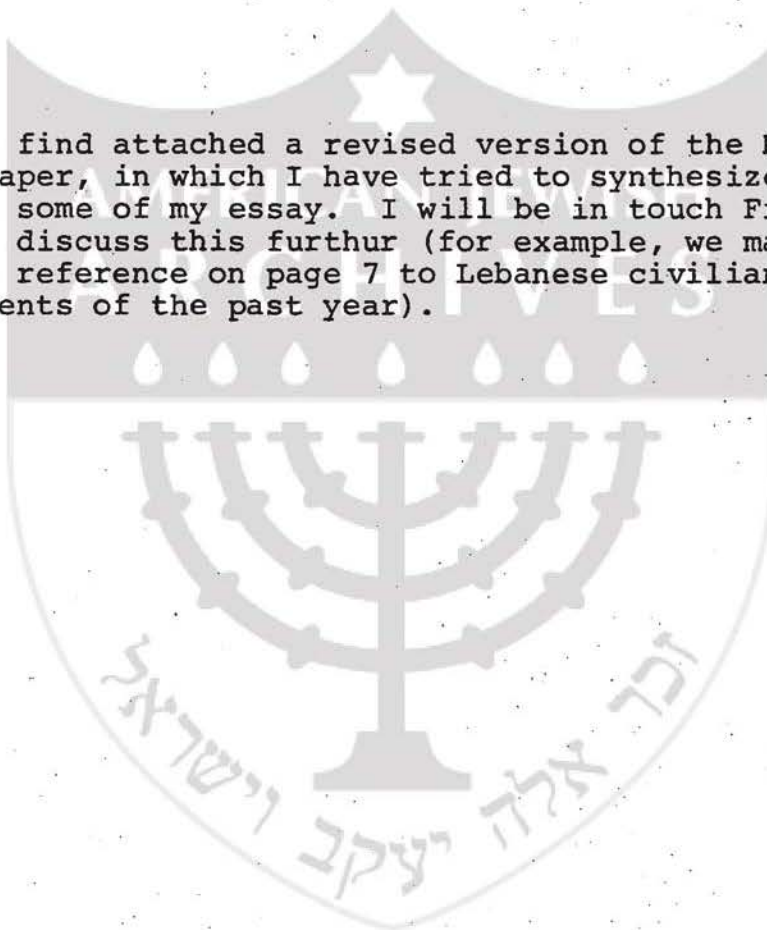
Series E: General Alphabetical Files. 1960-1992

Box 84, Folder 16, King, Martin Luther, Jr. [Paper], 1983.

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date June 30, 1983
to Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum
from Sam Weintraub
subject Martin Luther King Paper

Please find attached a revised version of the Martin Luther King, Jr. paper, in which I have tried to synthesize your 1981 address and some of my essay. I will be in touch Friday, if you want to discuss this further (for example, we may want to re-word the reference on page 7 to Lebanese civilian deaths in light of events of the past year).



The Reverend

By any standards of religious or civic leadership, Dr. Martin Luther King lives in our presence today as one of the greatest moral prophets of this century. Cast in the mold of Isaiah, Dr. King 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 his 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 any more: (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 our often painful recent history. He studied Jewish concerns, and his philosophy and activism found inspiration in Jewish ethics, traditions and history. He felt personally the pain of Jewish oppression, and acted towards its eradication. That solidarity was expressed quintessentially in Dr. King's now classic letter written in the Birmingham City Jail on April 16, 1963:

"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."

Were Martin Luther King, Jr. alive today, we would be devoting 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 nonviolent ways to further the causes of justice and reconciliation for the poor and deprived. [He would certainly not have allowed us 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.] Indeed, Dr. King consistently stressed the common struggle of Jews and Blacks for freedom and justice. As he told the 1958 Convention of the American Jewish Congress in Miami, when he became the first Black to address a national organization in the still-segregated South:

"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 political 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."

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The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was cruelly murdered by savage racial hatred on April 4, 1968. Some fifteen years have

passed since the Prophet of Nonviolence was struck down as a supreme victim of bloodthirsty violence. By all normal reckoning, fifteen years is a long period of mourning. Why do we, why does the nation 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?

The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched side by side with Dr. King during the historic march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, probably said it best. On the evening of March 25, 1968, ten days before the tragic assassination, Rabbi Heschel introduced Dr. King to 1000 Rabbis at the National Convention of the Rabbinical Assembly:

"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...

Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision and a way. I call upon every Jew and every American to hearken 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."

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. For the first time in American history, national organizations of Catholics, Protestants and Jews, blacks and whites gathered to examine the role of religious institutions in race relations. That Conference laid the foundations for the breakthrough March on Washington later that year, and according to social historians was a "turning point" in the forging of a "coalition of conscience" in support of the civil rights movement.

At that Conference, the voice, the vision and the way of Dr. King confronted the moral conscience of the nation. In a powerful address that brought 1700 religious and civic leaders to their feet, Dr. King set forth five challenges to the Churches and Synagogues, the Christian and Jewish communities, of our nation. These included:

I - THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

"They must make it palpably clear that segregation is morally wrong and sinful...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."

II - UPROOTING PREJUDICE

"..the Church and Synagogue...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...There are few things more thoroughly sinful than economic injustice."

IV - NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION

"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.

...the most potent instrument the Negro community can use to gain total emancipation in America is that of nonviolent resistance. Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it ends up creating 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..."

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...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..."

THE MORAL LEGACY OF DR. KING IN THE 1980'S

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 1983 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; nonviolent 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, Nonviolence 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. As Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee said in 1981 after two visits to Southeast Asian refugee camps:

"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 Muslim 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?"

Such callousness and dehumanization found no place in the philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King. Indeed, his heroic career evolved from his beliefs in the preciousness of each human life, and the interdependence of all people. Dr. King was particularly concerned with the danger of apathy, and as such he was deeply moved by the

words of Rabbi Joachim Prinz at the 1963 March on Washington:

"Will the nation ever forget the searing impact of Rabbi Prinz's demonstration: 'When I was the Rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned in my life and under those tragic circumstances is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.' A great people which created a great civilization became a nation of silent onlookers who remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder."

Christians, Jews and all people of good will best honor Dr. King's moral legacy if we undertake now a massive effort to establish a "new humanism", in America and on a global basis, that will restore the Biblical and democratic values of the infinite worth of each human life.

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, 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 have been 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 twelve 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 is a central moral issue, as Dr. King articulated in his day, that Congress develop a rational approach to arms sales and intensify universal disarmament measures. The very survival of the human family depends on such measures taken vigorously here and in concert with other nations.

COMBATting RACISM, ANTI-SEMITISM, AND ALL PREJUDICE

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. He saw both oppressions as products of social decay, and manipulated to thwart the necessary cooperation of Jews and Blacks. Thus he denounced,

before both friendly and critical audiences, all forms of anti-Semitism. On September 28, 1967, for example, he issued an official statement on 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."

Also in 1967, when a group at the Chicago Conference on New Politics introduced the newest form of anti-Semitism, namely, the obscene equation of Zionism and 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."

Lastly, in this connection, Dr. King opposed a third, persistent modern form of anti-Semitism: the cultural genocide of Soviet Jewry. In a moving, personal pledge he stated:

"I cannot sit idly by, even though I live in the United States and even though I happen to be an American Negro, and not be concerned about what happens to my brothers and sisters who happen to be Jews in Soviet Russia..."

In the name of humanity, I urge that the Soviet Government end all the discriminatory measures against its Jewish community."

Indeed, the plight of Soviet Jews reinforced Dr. King's conviction that "the denial of human rights anywhere is a threat to the affirmation of human rights everywhere" and that social evils warrant bold, nonviolent protest:

"Today people all over the world should be engaging in mass action to protest anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. There is a danger of silence today which unintentionally encourages evil to

flourish. Albert Einstein was right when he said, 'The world is in greater peril from those who tolerate evil than from those who actively commit it' ".

We will heed the voice of Martin Luther King, and respect his memory, if we will resolve to free our social institutions, and personal lives, from all prejudice and discrimination.

THE ULTIMATE LEGACY: A JOINT STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

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 predicted that the 1980's 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, and the threat of confrontations with the Soviet Union. It goes without saying that these worsening conditions most severely affect the sixty million Americans who are poor and near-poor, and disproportionately Black.

Such 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 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, "the Jews" were held responsible for the

ills of Germany, and the groundwork was laid for Hitler's genocide.)
Dr. King well understood this process:

"As the tensions and bewilderment of economic problems become more severe, history's scapegoats--the Jews--will be joined by new scapegoats, the Negroes. (Racists and anti-Semites) will seek to divert the people's minds and turn their frustrations and anger to the helpless and the outnumbered. Then whether the Negro and Jew shall live in peace will depend upon how firmly they resist, how effectively they reach the minds of the decent Americans and halt this deadly diversion."

Regrettably, some Blacks have resorted to "class politics" and scapegoated the Jewish community through anti-Semitic and anti-Israel accusations. In contradiction, we have the statements of Jewish leaders, who have protested these inflammatory attacks, and the sage words of Dr. King himself:

"In SCLC...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."

At the same time, Jewish leaders have made clear their continuing support for the battles against racism and poverty in American life. 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...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 all Americans."

Another group of Jewish leaders made clear their readiness to join forces 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."

It is especially important today that we recall such Jewish demonstrations against racism, and the ongoing efforts of Jews and Blacks for social justice. We need to recall that Rabbis stood in the rain day and night with Dr. King in Alabama, and submitted to beatings and imprisonment in solidarity with Black liberation. After Dr. King's assassination, the Jewish community joined with Christian leaders in organizing the Interreligious Committee Against

Poverty and the Martin Luther King Memorial Fund for Love and Justice. They participated as well in the Poor People's March in Washington "to dramatize the fact of human misery in our affluent midst and thus awaken the conscience of America". As Mrs. Coretta Scott King said in a December 1979 talk:

"..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...

"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."

That struggle was Martin Luther King's lifeblood. Dr. King, in his brief but monumental life, sought to transform a nation torn by strife and confusion into, as he would call it, "an oasis of freedom and justice". As his legacy he left not only visionary appeals and soul-stirring sermons, but a way, a bold, concrete and peaceful program to rebuild our world. That program urged all Americans to cross racial, ethnic and religious lines and unite in scorning violence, eradicating prejudice, and guaranteeing social and economic justice. Today, as we ponder a world even more anguished,

it is time to review our social agendas in terms of Dr. King's way, and measure ourselves, our communities, and our nation against his vision.

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.

