

Jews and Blacks: Getting Out the Vote

by Richard Michelson on October 31, 2008

"It was a beautiful Jewish neighborhood"—until the black residents moved in... —A Jewish voter explaining why he would not vote for Obama, quoted in The New York Times

When Reverend Martin Luther King left Selma, Alabama, and headed toward Montgomery to protest the literacy tests, violence, and economic pressures that were used to keep blacks from registering to vote, he was stopped by police with dogs and clubs. "Decent people know that prejudice is wrong," he'd said at that time, "but many are too frightened to speak out." King put out a call for help. "We cannot walk alone, and we cannot turn back."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the first to answer that call. Many in the Jewish community establishment condemned him. "Don't we have enough problems of our own?" they asked. But Heschel remembered his own mother and sisters and friends murdered in Poland. No one had come to their aid. "How can we love our neighbors if we abandon them in their time of need?" is how Heschel answered his critics, and then he and King prayed together and joined hands, as 3,000 people stood behind them cheering. The Reverend took a step forward, and as he kept pace, Heschel announced: "I feel like my legs are praying."

When I was born in 1953, my area of East New York, Brooklyn, was 90-percent Jewish. A short 12 years later, while King and Heschel were sharing an historic and stirring moment, symbolizing the coming together of race and religion, less than 10 percent of those living in the neighborhood were Jews. And by the time my Dad was shot on Pitkin Avenue during a robbery attempt, he was just one more Jewish exploiter to the black man who killed him. Had I been there, at the scene of the crime, I might have tried to explain how Jews had been prevalent in every facet of the Civil Rights Movement. They were instrumental in the founding of the NAACP and the SNCC. Jewish civil rights workers were killed alongside black workers in Mississippi in 1964. Jewish lawyers were instrumental in fighting civil liberty abuses during the 1960's. Every Passover, Jews still command their children to remember their ancestor's enslavement. Black slaves drew hope from the ancient Israelites journey out of Egypt. Harriet Tubman became known as the Moses of her people and their journey North on the Underground Railroad was often likened to our Exodus.

I grew up confused about race. My Dad owned a small hardware store. Since the neighborhood always needed fixing, he did a good business. My job was smashing the trash cans he sold, so they didn't look new and shiny. "Otherwise the *schvartzes* will steal them," he'd say. But the great majority of his customers were polite, churchgoing Negroes. My Dad loved to joke with his regulars. In the days before political correctness, this often consisted of ethnic jokes. He made fun of their people and they made fun of his people. Then everyone laughed. I grew up comfortable with racial stereotyping, yet thinking blacks and Jews were best friends with a common economic enemy.

But as I grew older, I also understood the racial tensions, the anger steeping on both sides. It is easy for Jews to feel unappreciated after all we have contributed to the Civil Right movement. We assume common interests as victimized outsiders and cannot understand the reluctance of black leaders to unequivocally condemn anti-Semitism.

Many blacks, however, feel patronized, or envious of Jewish upward mobility, which is made easier by the color of our skin. In America today, Jews are often fighting for causes, while blacks struggle for survival.

The poor, young, underprivileged black man who grabbed my father's briefcase ended up with a half-eaten gefilte-fish sandwich wrapped up in the day's *New York Times*. He was probably furious. Where was the money?

The local community, of course, ended up having to pay higher prices and traveling to a black-owned hardware store in Bed-Sty. The Jews who had abandoned East New York, insisting *it was a beautiful Jewish neighborhood until the blacks moved in*, would have called my father foolish for not following their lead, even though economic necessity, not high-mindedness, was the reason he remained.

I have spent many of my adult years writing books for young children that attempt to address and heal society's racial wounds; though as likely I am trying to heal the rift within myself. I think of the healing process, and recall that by the time King and Heschel arrived in Montgomery, four days after they left Selma, 25,000 people of all colors and religions had joined their march in pursuit of a common goal.

Today I imagine Heschel and King celebrating a country in which Barack Obama can win overwhelmingly white states. I think they might even celebrate a country where Reverend Wright can speak his mind in public and Jews can say out loud: *It was a beautiful neighborhood until...* Maybe to get to the next step, we must first air our dirty laundry in public. But if we do so, I would hope blacks remember the words of Martin Luther King: "I solemnly pledge to uphold the fair name of Jews. Not only because we need their friendship, and surely we do, but mainly because bigotry in any form is an affront to us all" And let me remind my fellow Jews of the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "One hundred years ago, the emancipation was proclaimed. It is time for the white man to strive for self-emancipation, to set himself free of bigotry." Let us not be manipulated by those who would turn us against each other. Whoever you chose to vote for in November, make certain you are voting from conviction, not from fear.