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Chapter

Equality before the Law Matters: The Legacy of American Jews and the Founding of the NAACP and the Modern Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

This chapter examines efforts by a small cadre of leading American Jews to bring to light human rights violations toward African Americans at the beginning of the 20th century. More specifically, this effort scrutinizes efforts by Jews who ushered in an era of human rights campaigning based on their moral principles, norms, and cultural practices. These same principles and practices manifested themselves in the co-founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. This profoundly important organization would lead concerted efforts to organize legal protest movements to bring about fairness in housing, employment, and education, regardless of race, color, or creed. This study will answer the following questions: What motivated leading American Jews to help co-found the NAACP and guide it become a leading advocate for African Americans in legal, political, and financial matters? Who were the Jewish leaders who came from various fields, including civil matters, education, law, and business to help create this nascent enterprise? What coalition-building took place between the Jews and African Americans over the last century leading to the birth of the civil rights movement in America in the 1950s and 1960s? What inroads or gains were made from the establishment of the NAACP and its development to bring about civil rights, and equality under the law in housing, education, employment, and banking to the forefront for blacks living in America? Ultimately, this research will underscore ways in which leading Jewish men and women who helped establish the NAACP were successful in integrating this organization with other civic organizations and working black leaders to make it a force in making the NAACP a force in achieving social justice and equality before the law.

Keywords: civil rights, education, conscious raising, equality under the law, NAACP, American Jews, African Americans, coalition-building

1. Introduction

American Jews have played a significant role in the founding and funding of some of the most important civil rights organizations in the United States over

the last 100 years. These include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights in 1950, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, and the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) in 1960. These advocacy efforts are largely the by-product of calls within Jewish culture and religion to respect the fundamental rights of all human beings. More importantly, they draw from a central Jewish tradition that all people are created equal, and it is the religious and cultural duty of all Jews to see that they are treated equally under the law [1].[1]

A majority of historical and scholarly discourse concerning Jews and blacks largely focuses on fluctuating inter-group relationships and perceptions of the two communities in the post-World War II period. Consequently, most of the attention paid concerns the roles that blacks, and Jews played in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s ([2], p. 70). This lack of attention is largely attributed to supposedly limited contact between Jews and blacks prior to 1920. However, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, while this contact was indeed limited, many of the efforts put forth by Jews and blacks in the mid-twentieth century originated in response to circumstances occurring decades earlier, including the Springfield Riots of 1909 and the Russian Pogroms of 1904 and 1905, as well as early attempts to combat escalating racial violence and injustices through legal means in the 1920s and 1930s.

Another important element that makes the fate of Jews and the Civil Rights Movement unique concerns the role of empathy. Jews, more than other groups, could and did empathize with the plight of blacks and their historical oppression. In newspaper articles, speeches, and debates, Jewish activists compared the black movement out of the South to the exodus from Egypt, noting that both blacks and Jews lived in ghettos, and both groups suffered at the hands of mob violence; for blacks, it was lynching's and for the Jews, it was pogroms. These comparisons would lead many Jewish civil rights activists to find compassion and empathy for blacks, but also, the imperative to act on an article of faith.

This chapter highlights the evolution of Jewish civil rights activism, such as the Reformed Judaism and the Ethical Cultural Society's efforts to promote an evolution of humanist and Unitarian views to form the basis of Jewish activism throughout the twentieth century. Their involvement would lead to a series of coalition-building enterprises during the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, forming the crux of an all-out attack on the racial "status quo" in America, challenging the existing inequality for African Americans in housing, education, employment, and civil rights. These exertions contributed ultimately to the passage of the two most important pieces of legislation regarding civil rights, the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and the Civil Rights Act of 1965.

2. Two evils converge

The future of blacks and Jews working together for the cause of equality and dignity for all was greatly impacted by two events in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, one domestic and the other foreign. The Russian pogroms against Jews during the late 1880s and early 1900s mirrored violence that was taking

[1] Judaism teaches respect for the fundamental rights of others is a duty to God. Equality is also espoused in the Jewish tradition that all mankind is created in God's image and laws should not be written to favor one over the over. Both teachings are found in the Babylonian Talmud and the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible.

place in America against blacks in the South as well as in the North. Denunciation of Russia's treatment of Jews exposed the embarrassing question of similarity between Russia's oppression of Jews and others, with American treatment of blacks or, for that matter, of Chinese and Native Americans. This embarrassment was not limited to public opinion or media scrutiny. It was also paradoxically being exposed in political circles as well. As early as 1892, the platforms of both the Democratic and Republican parties denounced religious persecution in Russia amid widespread criticism of Russia's antisemitic practices ([3], p. 186). While both political parties were steadfast in their inclination to emphasize Russian obscurantism, they were also inclined to ignore the alarmingly common place practice of lynching, as well as urban antiblack riots taking place [3]. However, Russian horrors sensitized some Americans to the need to react with urgency to their own country's indignities ([3], p. 187). This would be especially true with the urgency by some Jewish activists with the plight of blacks living in a racist America.

The Russian pogrom waves of 1905–1906 propelled a new cadre of activists, many of them Jewish, for whom the connotation of lynching and pogroms would be second nature. The belief that such travesties were born of similar cases—the conveyance of authorities, the righteousness of the victims—helped give the issue of black injustices prominence not seen previously. The intersection between the call for the protection of blacks from lynching and Jews from pogroms would provide the immediate backdrop to lynching in 1909 and the first major American organization for the promotion of black civil rights: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). More specifically, the Kishinev pogroms greatly influenced the politics of the American left concerned for Jews on the Lower East Side who were now preoccupied with the conditions of American blacks ([3], p. 188).

3. Springfield riots

The Springfield Riots resulted from exaggerated accusations by local authorities against two African American men for allegedly attacking white women ([4], p. 12).[2] The ensuing violence resulted in lynching's, additional deaths, and the burning of many homes and businesses. The arrival of militia and thousands of National Guard troops forced thousands of black residents of Springfield to flee for their lives [4]. Local officials explained away the riots in Springfield by blaming the incident on local blacks who were on the cusp of taking over the city. In response to their incursion, rioters tried to run them out of town. Local officials reported in the press that blacks had fired on whites first—a standard charge in official reports on Russian pogroms as well—and that the mob violence was revenge for the murder of whites ([3], p. 201).

Labor leader and settlement house activist William Wallings traveled to Springfield to view the carnage for himself. Writing for the *Independent Magazine*, he penned an article called "The Race War in the North," published on September 2, 1908 ([4], p. 12). In his reporting of the race riots, Wallings forewarned that if unchecked, the heinous antiblack repression so characteristic of the South was certain to move northward, remarking, "what was needed was a large and powerful body of citizens ready to come to their aid" ([3], p. 201).

Upon his return to New York City, Walling went to work formulating concrete proposals for forming a committee to denounce both the treatment of American blacks and Russian Jews. His work to highlight the plight of Russian Jews under the Tsar Nicholas II was published in his 1908 *Russia's Message: The True World Import of*

[2] The two men lynched were a barber and cobbler, both of whom were married to white women.

the Revolution. Translated into nine languages, the book illuminated the treatment of Jewish suffering as extensive, with staggering poverty, government persecution, and anti-Jewish massacres, along with the Kishinev's pogrom extensively detailed ([3], p. 202).

Supporters of Wallings' reporting of the Springfield Riots encouraged him to take the initiative to launch a "large and powerful body." At a public meeting in the fall of 1909 taking place at New York City's Cooper Union Hall, they laid the groundwork for such an organization as a direct response to the pogroms of Russia and the violence against blacks throughout the United States that had reached a tipping point in Springfield in the spring of 1909 [4]. This call to arms by Wallings would later lead to the establishment of the National Negro Committee and formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. The NAACP was the first major American organization for the promotion of black civil rights, saw an intersection in the call for the protection of blacks from lynching and Jews fleeing from Russian pogroms. In their first organization meeting, delegates passed a resolution of sympathy with the victims of the Kishinev Massacre and vowed to combat the unending violence visited on America's black population ([5], p. 92).

Wallings efforts to promote black civil rights was greatly supported by his association with the Ethical Culture Society (ECS) also founded in New York City decades earlier. The ECS was a largely deist and republican organization formed to promote social and humanitarianism to those less fortunate ([3], p. 15).[3] ECS members who had served as agents of change on politically charged matters such as labor rights, civil liberties, and environmentalism. Prominent Ethical Culture members included Dr. Henry Moskowitz, John Lovejoy Elliott, Anna Galin Spencer, and William Salter, along with other ECS members from fields of law, education, government, and finance. Other important Jewish figures in the early development of the NAACP included Louis Marshall, founder of the American Jewish Committee, who vowed to take on the KKK at every turn in the South on behalf of blacks and Jews alike ([3], p. 15).[4] Another was Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter who helped draft legal briefs and train legal clerks in the NAACP field offices. To their credit, they would also not only help found the NAACP, but other civic minded organizations as well. These include the National Civil Liberties Bureau, the forerunner of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The central theme to many of these organizations was the belief that change needed to be pragmatic and to

[3] The mantra of this group was "deed not creed." The Society argued that "man must assume responsibility for the direction of his life and destiny." All told, the ECS was an outgrowth of American Reform Judaism, and went to great pains to be "non-religious" in as many ways as possible. This organization was largely followed by upper-middle-class German Jews, dedicated to assimilation in American society. The tenets of ECS were born out of radical new notions about the universality of God and man's responsibilities to society. The leader of ECS in America is credited to Felix Adler who had been radicalized in Germany while studying at Heidelberg University. In his opinion, Judaism of the future was one that would survive in the modern world by recasting some of society's deeply held beliefs. One such belief was Jews must reject its "narrow spirit of exclusiveness." This effort included defining themselves not by their biblical identity as the "chosen people," but rather their social concern and deeds on behalf of the labor classes.

[4] Anti-Semitic violence loomed large in the southern cities of Atlanta, Nashville, Jacksonville, and Miami, as well as synagogues in Birmingham, Charlotte, and Gastonia, North Carolina. Even when faced with such violence, Rabbis and Jewish business leaders still took part in rallies and protest marches and found themselves victims of death threats as well.

some degree radical in nature. Another important tenet adhered to be the steadfast belief that a better world required hard work, persistence, and political organization ([3], p. 19).

The NAACP, which represented several once-stigmatized groups, had begun to chip away at the edifice of discrimination, and increasingly emboldened other groups to assert their rights. Labor unions, radical groups, feminist organizations, and bodies such as the American Civil Liberties Union (1917), the American Association of University Professors (1915), and the National Conference of Social Workers (1917) made criticizing the established order politically possible. Muckraking journalists exposed one flaw after another in American society leading to substantial changes in educational, legal, and professional options. However, such challenges to the "status quo" in American society by these groups created a backlash led by White Protestant Americans who identified with the older social order and believed any attack on the "status quo" was an attack on them ([5], p. 115). This, in turn, led to restrictive immigration policies directed at the composition of the recent immigrants between 1880 and 1920 ([5], p. 116).[5]

The founders of the NAACP set out to allow people, individually or collectively, to define who they are, so society could accept their definition. The founder's people's need to be defined by their dreams, goals, sense of identity, and self-consciousness, not the identity thrust upon them by society ([4], pp. 12–13). The association's attempt to extend progressive values, goals, and methods into the area of race relations was in direct conflict with Booker T. Washington's program of self-help, solidarity, and moderation, and was met with luke-warm acceptance by both Northern reformers and those in the South who dared attempt to attack the "status quo" ([6], p. 6).

Walling and Marie White Ovington, a fellow settlement house activist, were later joined by Oswald Garrison Villard, president of the *New York Evening Post*, which published the manifesto, *The Call*. This publication encouraged many prominent American progressives to join a national movement to combat the evils of racial discrimination and its associated violence. These representatives included progressives from settlement house movements, the women's suffrage movement, the Niagara Movement (1905–1910), the African American churches, the descendants of the abolitionist movements, and the anti-lynching crusade, led by Ida B. Wells-Barnett. The progressives who constituted many of the delegates who formed the NAACP would later be joined by W.E.B. Du Bois, charged with leading the research and publicity department and serving as editor of the NAACP's official magazine, *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* ([4], p. 12). This magazine served as an effective vehicle for keeping the organization's programs and activities before the black public ([6], p. 7).

4. The New York paradox

While is it true that many Jewish activists who helped found the NAACP were living in New York at the time, there existed a certain level of irony involved since tens

[5] Calls to curtail immigration severely and to ensure the immigrants represented the more "desirable" races date back to 1894 with the founding of Immigration Restriction League. The members of this old-stock new England patricians who banded together to call for an end to free and open immigration into the United States, expressed a vision of America in which people like them would define culture and hold political power.

of thousands of both races were facing their own troubles while living within a stone's throw of one another ([3]), pp. 17–18).[6] This circumstance was largely the by-product of immigration patterns that shifted at the turn-of-the-century, for both the black and Jewish diasporas ([5], p. 25).[7] Paradoxically, so did their limited and confined relations between the two groups. It would take the Russian pogroms and the Springfield Riots to bring them together. All told, New York City would serve as the epicenter of the union between the two and it would last for well over a hundred years.

The period between 1895 and 1920 saw an increase of tens of thousands of southern blacks and Eastern European Jews settling in the Empire State. With little money, grand expectations, and faced with housing, education, and employment discrimination, both groups centered their relocation within the confines of Harlem, New York. For blacks, a string of natural disasters, mob violence, and a lack of economic opportunities led them northward. The eastern European Jews, like many northern blacks, were also escaping restricted freedoms, substandard living conditions, mob violence, and romantic notions of America's promised wealth ([5], p. 71).[8]

To combat these ills, the National Urban League was founded in New York in 1911 to help newly arrived black migrants from the rural South. This organization sought to enable African Americans to secure economic self-reliance, parity, and civil rights. Jewish activists went to great lengths to help support this endeavor with financial and organizational help as well as leadership. Jewish American economist, Edwin R.A. Seligman served as its first chairman of the board. In addition, Jewish labor activists went to great pains to work with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers to help organize their "black brothers" for union membership which was opposed by the American Federation of Labor national board.

These newcomers to New York both experienced backlash from landlords, employers, and social clubs. This anti-Negroism and anti-Semitism inhibited economic and social opportunities for both groups, promoted by hatred and racism including landlords refusing to rent to either community as well as denied membership to social clubs regardless of merit. In many respects, blacks, and Jews

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[6] Throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s, Jews of New York City had experienced little or no anti-Semitic episodes. However, that changed after the Stock Market Crash of 1873. Since the crash was blamed on the bond market in Germany and because many Jews in the financial section in New York were German, the resulting depression was laid at the feet of Jews. Sadly, the impact of this crash was felt for over seven years and resulted in the unemployment of one out of four Americans. The result of this crash and its fallout would give rise to antisemitism in New York and other parts of the United States for the next fifty years. The exclusion of Joseph Seligman, a wealthy and prominent Jewish businessman of German descent from a famed hotel in New York City served as a harbinger of things to come for many esteemed and successful Jews who once were able to mingle with many White Protestant elites.

[7] Over 6.5 million blacks would migrate North between 1865 to 1940. Many would settle in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.

[8] By 1900, Harlem became a popular destination for most Eastern European Jews and Southern blacks. Even though both groups co-existed in Harlem, they lived parallel lives. Living beside one another, and not among one another typified their relations. While they shared many of the same problems, they went about solving them independently of each other. This would change over time with the inception of the NAACP and collaborative effort of activists in both communities.

both occupied the lowest rung on the social hierarchy ladder, and without mutual assistance toward one another, they would remain there [5].[9]

Not all the discrimination and hatred experienced by blacks and Jews was attributed to the bigotry and intolerance of the dominant gentile white population. Ironically, both groups experienced biases and prejudice from within their own communities. Eastern European Jews were attacked by assimilated German Jews for having lacked social, political, and economic acumen. This included clannish behavior, orthodox dress, mores, traditions, and lack of effort to learn the English language. Similarly, well-established blacks wanted to curb the influx of Southern blacks whose presence created an unbalanced job market, plagued by excessive supply, and limited demand. Northern blacks did not spare the rod when it came to southern black migration; they were deemed lazy, shiftless, and an illiterate mass who migrated north, thereby reducing economic opportunities and privileges to a minimum for Northern blacks [5].[10] This bigotry and intolerance exhibited by members of their own communities would play a prolific role in both groups pushing for measures to combat racism and prejudice. Elites and those who had made it, did not want to make waves, and impede their own gains. However, these very same elites would later find the doors of many upper echelon institutions, hotels, social clubs, and preparatory schools were slammed shut against Jewish membership. The ECS provided Jewish society with a timely vehicle for dealing with this mounting bigotry ([3], p. 17).[11]

5. Freedmen schools legacy enjoined

Throughout their history, proper non-secular and secular schooling was a mainstay for the success of Jewish diaspora. This success would include efforts by Rabbi Felix Adler to "humanize" course offerings for young children in Ethical Society schools to provide a well-rounded education for children both Jewish and Gentile. Educational efforts on the part of Jewish activists were not limited to children in the North, they took their mission to the South as well. Using the Freedman schools as a model, this tradition was once again carried forth by Jewish philanthropists who worked with other African American reformers to bring education to rural blacks living in the South at the turn of the century. These efforts would play a large role in closing the education gap between whites and blacks. It was estimated that completion of school consisted

[9] Critics charge the lack awareness or sympathy of the plight of blacks was in large part a by-product of the self-segregated nature of the Jewish community. Share cultural experiences, religious upbringing, and dietary restrictions fostered a social, cultural, and economic divide between Jews and non-Jews, namely the blacks of New York. The lack of shared experiences was also related to the clannish and tribalistic disposition of Jews themselves. They most often frequented establishments owned and operated by fellow Jews. Some argue this was largely attributed to communal dependence and preserving ethnic homogeneity.

[10] With mixed success, each group fought and won legislative measures to combat oppressive prejudice they endured politically and socially. The Civil Rights Act of 1895 and 1913 resulted in provisions which forbad discrimination in public accommodations.

[11] Where Jews once lived in an atmosphere of tolerance, the tide toward discrimination and prejudice had turned against Jews in New York and other cities throughout the United States. The case of Joseph Seligman, a wealthy and prominent Jew of German descent who was denied entrance to the famous Grand Hotel of Saratoga, New York bears this out.

of a three-year gap. Among whites, the average was the completion of eighth grade, as compared to the fifth grade for blacks. By 1950, the education gap between whites and blacks living in the South had closed within one grade.

Between 1910 and 1940, this effort was led by Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, who worked tirelessly with Chicagoan Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears and Roebuck, to fund primary and secondary schools and twenty black colleges (including Howard, Dillard, and Fisk Universities) throughout the American South. Over 5,357 schools, shops, and teacher homes were constructed in three decades. At the height of the so-called "Rosenwald Schools," nearly forty percent of southern blacks were educated at one of these institutions ([7], p. 1).[12] This effort has been called by some historians and scholars one of the most important initiatives to advance black education in the early 20th century ([8], p. 1).[13]

The gains made from Rosenwald graduates were profound. Students who went to Rosenwald Schools had higher IQ scores than kids who did not. They made more money later in life. They were more likely to travel to the North as part of the Great Migration. They lived a little bit longer. The women delayed marriage and had fewer kids. And crime rates around the schools went down ([9], p. 1).

By the mid-1950s, Jews along with African Americans began to press for federal legislation that would check the free hand of private institutions to discriminate as they pleased. This effort rivaled the same spirited moral crusade put forth by the abolitionists following the Civil War and supported by Republican radicals throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s. Jewish defense groups and religious organizations understood that the divide between public and private meant little in a place where a state gave employers, realtors, admission offices, hotels, and others the right to do their business as they pleased. The new kind of America that these groups sought to cultivate through legal sanction would allow people to put themselves forward as applicants for jobs, schools, housing, and places of recreation as individuals, and no one would be able to bar entry to them as Jews or blacks ([5], p. 267).

If any era in the history of American Jewry could be considered a "golden age," it would be the twenty years following World War II ([5], p. 259). This period, say American Jews, pushed the troubled memories of the recent past aside—the uncertainties of the Great Depression, the anti-Semitism of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and the horrors of the Nazi regime—to the margins of their concerns. American Jews embraced themes that were a mainstay throughout the post-war years: prosperity and affluence, suburbanization and acceptance, the triumph of political liberalism, and the expansiveness of unlimited possibilities. In addition to their efforts to improve their own lot, they also joined forces with other Americans of goodwill who worked to change the status quo both for themselves and for America's larger minority population, the African Americans ([5], pp. 260–261).

American Jews went to great pains to express their awareness of what had happened to the European Jewry during the Holocaust and apply to the injustices happening in America to other minority groups. While the pursuit of upward mobility, gaining acceptance, and avoiding memorializing the tragic events that destroyed Jewish life in Europe was always present, they kept the message of "social justice"

[12] Many of these schools would become obsolete by 1954 after the Supreme Court ruled the segregated schooling was unconstitutional. Once the pride of many black communities, many were abandoned or demolished.

[13] Rosenwald's munificence was continued by his daughter, Edith Stern of New Orleans, whose Stern Family Fund in later years contributed vast sums to civil rights activities throughout the South. With Jews only constituting only one percent of the region's total population their philanthropy, namely funds and manpower in this regard is substantial.

for all alive in their synagogues and in the Jewish press. American Jews worked tirelessly at the local, state, and federal levels with other civil rights organizations, as well as on their own to push through civil rights bills. While Jews had participated in the freedom struggle of African Americans since the beginning of the twentieth century, and American Jewish publications, both in Yiddish and English, had decried racism for five decades, only in the aftermath of World War II did the organized Jewish community—synagogues, synagogal bodies, defense organizations, and the like—become a force engaged in social justice movements. With the anxiety of their own status in America abated, it was time for American Jews to take on the task of securing the status of other minorities in America even if it meant rising the opprobrium of the non-Jewish majority 9 ([5], p. 266).

There exists a legion of examples of Jewish participation, large and small, in the civil rights struggle of the postwar years. Jewish lawyers supported the civil rights struggle by defending black defendants who are wrongly accused of crimes for which they did not commit. For example, in 1950 Civil Rights Congress attorney, Bella Abzug went to Mississippi to defend Willy McGee, an African American who had been falsely accused of raping a white woman. On appeal, Abzug argued that McGee's rights to due process, venue change, and a jury of his peers had been violated. Even though this appeal failed, Abzug's actions fit into the tradition going back to the early part of the century of Jewish lawyers using their professional expertise to bring racism to an end [5]. The same sense of responsibility to help African Americans achieve status in America culminated in several Jewish organizations risking their reputations in support of ending segregation of schools, playgrounds, and swimming pools – all considered widely controversial by most Americans at the time.

6. Brown v. Board of Education (1954)

The movement to end public school segregation was realized with the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Helping in this effort was research performed by the black sociologist Kenneth Clark who was commissioned by the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League. His study documented the psychological impact of school segregation on children. Clark's findings that segregation damaged self-esteem fed directly into the legal brief prepared by the NAACP. This ruling was called by many Jewish leaders a "red-letter day in American history" ([8], p. 23).

Inspired by this important legal win of the NAACP, Jewish communal leaders in Washington, D.C., led by executive director Isaac Frank, were instrumental in using their offices of the Jewish Community Council to facilitate the desegregation of the city's schools, playgrounds, and swimming pools [5]. This effort rested on the Jewish Community Council's belief that Jews, as well as blacks living in America, deserved to be seen as individuals rather than members of a group to be discriminated against.

Spurred by the Brown ruling and the success of taking on segregation in District of Columbia's schools, pools, and playgrounds, Jewish defense organizations in other cities continued to file legal briefs in civil rights cases dealing with housing, employment, education, and public accommodation. Many of the local and state desegregation appeals and subsequent regulations were drafted in the offices of these very same Jewish agencies [8].

The moral crusade of the 1950s and 1960s for social justice, led by many Jews of this period, centered on the belief that Jews had long suffered from laws and

social practices that prevented them from being considered individuals, rather than members of a group. For many Jews participating in this crusade still felt the lingering effects of discrimination against Jews in employment, housing, and education and felt it morally imperative to secure federal legislation that would check the free hand of private institutions as well as government institutions to discriminate as they please [5]. Jewish defense groups and religious organizations understood that the divide between public and private meant little in a place where the state gave employers, realtors, admissions offices, hotels, and others the right to do their business as they pleased. Ultimately, they were seeking to recast America in such a way that people regardless of race, color, or creed could put themselves forward as applicants for jobs, schools, housing, and places of recreation as individuals, and no one could be able to bar entry to them.

7. Into the breach (1960s)

The sense of common purpose on behalf of social justice for all taken up by many Jews manifested itself in innumerable symbolic actions throughout the twentieth century ([5], p. 268). Jewish participation in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s far transcended institutional associations. This was especially true with many Jewish activists who identified themselves with the liberal avant-garde of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. This call to action was not lost on the young within the Jewish community as more and more college aged Jews took part in several civic rights projects at the local, state, and federal levels throughout the 1960s. They joined other like-minded young people who saw fit to challenge the "status quo" of racial segregation in the South and support efforts to pass federal laws and court orders to shatter legal supports of Jim Crow ([8], p. 25). One of the most important challenges to Jim Crow came in the summer of 1961, when several hundred young men and women rode busses across the South to challenge segregation in public transportation. Organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), white Freedom Riders (about two thirds of whom were Jews) traveled throughout the South on regularly scheduled busses for seven months in 1961 in order to challenge racial discrimination in public accommodations ([10], p. 1).[14] They joined other young activists from other parts of the country to heighten the public's awareness that recent Supreme Court rulings regarding public accommodations were not being followed. The rides' purpose was to test compliance with two Supreme Court rulings: *Boynton v. Virginia*, which declared that segregated bathrooms, waiting rooms and lunch counters were unconstitutional, and *Morgan v. Virginia*, in which the court ruled that it was unconstitutional to implement and enforce segregation on interstate busses and trains ([11], p. 1). For their efforts, these activists were harassed, attacked, beaten, and jailed. Moved to act on their behalf and rally to their cause, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission to ban segregation in interstate travel, removal of Jim Crow signs from stations, waiting rooms, water fountains and restrooms in bus terminals. This law went into effect on November 1, 1961 ([11], p. 2).

[14] It is estimated that over 60 Freedom Rides took place, nearly 75 percent of the riders were between the ages of 18 and 20 years old. About one third were blacks, a quarter, women. The volunteers came from 40 states and were put through rigorous training in non-violence tactics. In later years, more than two dozen of the riders would go onto become teachers or professors, ministers as well as lawyers.

8. Mississippi freedom summer (1964)

Another poignant movement in the civil rights movement of the 1960s came in summer of 1964 when several hundred northern college students heeded the call from SNCC and CORE to participate in voter-registration drives in several Southern states. Once again, young Jewish activists were among these civil rights advocates. It is estimated that as many as 90 percent of the civil rights lawyers in Mississippi were Jewish ([8], p. 27). Large numbers of them were recent graduates of Ivy League law schools who dedicated themselves to working around the clock analyzing welfare standards, the bail system, arrest procedures, justice-of-the-peace rulings. Racing from one Southern town to another, they obtained parade permits and issued complaints on jail beatings and intimidation.

During the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, students who took part made up about one-third to one-half of the young men and women (out of 700) who traveled to the South. These students were lauded for taking part in legal, medical, and educational pursuits on behalf of poor African Americans living in rural areas of Mississippi.[15] In addition, many of these students led voter registration drives that put them in harm's way. The strategy for this program was to take advantage of America's violent racism and publicize it ([5], p. 268).

The organizers surmised that violence against white northern college students would attract the attention of the federal government and the nation, whereas commonplace violence against African Americans did not ([11], p. 1). In turn, the federal government would be forced to protect the civil rights workers and stand up to the state and local authorities [11]. Sadly, over the course of Freedom Summer, at least six activists were murdered, and volunteers also experienced 1,000 arrests, 80 beatings, 35 shooting incidents, and 30 bombings of homes, churches, and schools. However, the intensity of this experience also created a powerful sense of purpose and community among blacks and whites working together for a common cause [11].

Even though only a few hundred new black voters were able to register in Mississippi that summer, the harassment, and reprisals against them, was widely covered in the national media and spurred public outrage. This would in turn lead to a groundswell of support for new laws and federal intervention in Mississippi and other Southern states on behalf of black voters. In the end, the harassment and reprisals against black voters and violence toward young middle-class students and activists helped spur the U.S. Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 [11].[16]

9. Freedom marches (1964–1965)

While the number of Jewish activists who rode busses into the South, registered blacks to vote, picketed segregated establishments, and participated in protest marches is noteworthy (over thirty percent), their activism was not done. They also marched in several protests in southern cities as well. Among them were not only young Jewish students, but also several dozen Reform rabbis who marched among the demonstrators in Selma and Birmingham. Many of them were beaten,

[15] More than 40 Freedom Schools opened in 20 communities. Over 2,000 students were enrolled, and 175 teachers were enjoined in the effort.

[16] It is estimated that only a few hundred new black voters were able to register, but the harassment and reprisals against them were widely covered in the national media. Public outrage helped swell support for new laws and federal intervention.

tear gassed and arrested for their efforts. Anyone who tried to render aid to these protesters were also beaten as well. The lasting impact of these freedom rides, voter drives, and marches was far reaching since they were not only reporting in print but also broadcasted on television sets all across America. The federal government could no longer ignore the public opinion that supported crusades for racial justice, proposed civil rights legislation, and calls the realization of the American dream for all its citizens.

10. Civil rights legislation (1964–1965)

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s culminated in federal legislation pass by Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. While the face of these efforts by 1964 and 1965 was Dr. Martin Luther King behind the scenes he was buoyed by devoted Jewish activists. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were drafted by legal scholars housed in the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism under the aegis of the Leadership Conference. The Jewish community continued its support for civil rights laws addressing persistent discrimination in voting, housing, and employment against not only women and people of color, but also those in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities, and the disabled community as well.[17]

11. The purge and contradiction in terms

At the height of the Civil Rights Movement between 1954, the year of Brown v. Board of Education, to 1964, when the Civil Rights Act was passed, Jews and blacks worked hand in hand for equal justice and civil rights. They marched together, put themselves in harm's way, and pressed politicians to pass important legislation to change the status quo. However, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (ended legal segregation), even though it was a great victory, blacks saw little to celebrate since deep institutional systemic racism had not been addressed.

Another important development in the Civil Rights Movement was an internal struggle within the black civil rights movement between Dr. Martin Luther King and a new generation of more militant black youth. Eventually the influential black organization SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), purged whites from their leadership, which in effect meant Jews. These younger black leaders believed the black power movement needed to help themselves and allying with whites would not advance the cause. More importantly, they viewed Jews as white, not as fellow travelers who also have suffered from oppression ([12], p. 1).

Even though Jews had much effort and resources into the fight for civil rights, there existed a dichotomy between the two groups. Those Jews who had put themselves on the front lines of the civil rights movement had misjudged what it took for whites to reshape their lives through their hands, feet, mouths, and hearts, as compared to blacks who still faced systemic institutional racism even with the passage of legislation. The African American population still suffered persecution, poverty, and deprivation as no other group in America had and still does ([13], p. 1). Some critics argued that Jews had struck a "Faustian bargain" in the process of making it in America, that is they accepted acculturation and in doing so they had given up their collective self.

[17] Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, assessed on January 5, 2021. https://rac.org/jews-and-civil-rights-movement.

Another important development in the schism between Jewish civil rights activists and their black counterparts was the rise of black antisemitism which cast doubt on the intention of the identity of American Jewish liberals and radicals. With candor and realism, this black antisemitic rebuke centered on two premises advocated by Jewish liberals and radicals: one, the notion that both blacks and Jews comprise a community of the oppressed and are striving for the same outcome-an American society of merit in which religious, ethnic, and racial barriers were unimportant; and two, Jews are never acting more true to their religious and ethnic heritage than when they are working side by side with blacks to create a society free of racial and religious prejudice ([13], p. 1). All told, many African American critics of Jewish activism on behalf of blacks centered on the charge that Jews were whites with all the privileges accruing to those white skins and they were no longer an oppressed minority group, they had made it in America economically, politically, and socially [13]. In this vein, they were a part of the majority and were party to the continued oppression of blacks. In no short order Jews had never experienced anything remotely resembling the enslavement, discrimination, and racism encountered by blacks while living in America for over three and a half centuries, nor had blacks achieved gains in status, never experienced the economic gains and social prosperity of Jews, not before or since [13].

When Jews no longer found themselves being accepted into the civil rights movement of the late 1960s, they turned their attention elsewhere. This was especially true after the Six-Day War, which came right after the rise of identity politics and the rejection of black power activists of whites inside their movement and cause. In response, Jews began to turn their attention and political energy on the fate of Soviet Jews and the security of Israel [12].

12. Conclusion

Most of the historical and scholarly discourse concerning civil rights in America focuses on the fluctuating inter-group relationships between Jews and blacks during the post-World War II period. However, there exists a body of additional knowledge that highlights the efforts made by Jewish activists, both secular and non-secular, prior to the 1950s and 1960s to move racial, economic, and political injustices against blacks to the forefront. Ultimately, this chapter focuses on the role that human empathy in response to violence against both Jews and blacks played in helping form some of the most important civil rights organizations of the twentieth century in their quest for social justice.

The efforts by a small cadre of leading American Jews to bring to light human rights violations toward African Americans ushered in an era of human rights campaigning based on their moral principles, norms, and their cultural practices. The confluence of Jewish interests and the African American pursuit of economic, political, and social freedom was not without pain and suffering to both parties. Those Jews who supported civil rights activism in both the South and North found themselves the subjects of anti-Semitic violence, which included the bombing of temples and other crimes against the Jewish people.

Jewish leaders argued that both groups would greatly benefit if American society progressed beyond restrictions based on religious, ethnic, and racial discriminations. To this end, Jews activists established the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League to help eradicate racial prejudice in American society. They also made substantial financial contributions, provided organizational and leadership help, and volunteered to serve in the many civil rights organizations throughout the 1950s and 1960s—including the NAACP,

the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Sadly, these later contributions have been largely forgotten when it comes to Jewish contributions to help America live up to its ideals of equality and justice and their place in the fight for civil rights for all.

In the final analysis, the reasons why so many Jews were drawn to the cause of racial equality and justice are multifaceted. Judaism expresses the moral obligation to work for justice for all people, and the desire to achieve the ideals of American equality became a mutual aspiration of all people. Additionally, Jews empathized with African Americans in their pursuit to move beyond discriminatory racial labeling as being "other" citizens, as the memory of the Holocaust impelled them to prevent racist violence against another group [14]. Jewish leaders, organizations, and the press called for the involved dismantling of the status quo and to upset the cherished equilibrium that had allowed both Northern and Southern Jews to thrive in a largely Protestant America ([5], p. 271).

American Jews went to great pains to express their awareness of what had happened to the European Jewry during the Holocaust and apply to the injustices happening in America to other minority groups. While the pursuit of upward mobility, gaining acceptance, and avoiding memorializing the tragic events that destroyed Jewish life in Europe was always present, they kept the message of "social justice" for all alive in their synagogues and in the Jewish press. American Jews worked tirelessly at the local, state, and federal levels with other civil rights organizations, as well as on their own, to push through civil rights bills.

These same moral principles and practices manifested themselves in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. This profoundly important organization would organize legal protests to bring about fairness in housing, employment, and education, regardless of race, color, or creed. The Jewish men and women who helped establish the NAACP were successful in integrating this organization with other civic organizations and mentored black leaders to take over the leadership of the NAACP and establish it as a powerful agent for social justice and equality under the law. These joint efforts contributed to the passage of two of the most important pieces of legislation regarding civil rights: The Voting Rights Act of 1964 and the Civil Rights Act of 1965.

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