

Martin Luther King's Impact on the Jewish Community

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Martin Luther King, Jr. would have been 54 years old on January 15. Since his death at the age of 39, Dr. King's dreams have evaporated and most Americans have turned inward.

It is getting harder and harder to remember how King ignited us, changed us, and returned American Jews to their prophetic tradition. But he did.

The Jews, a people with generally decentralized patterns, responded to King as to no other American in the country's history. In effect, he became the living moral flagship for the nation -- and especially for the liberal Jewish community in the 1960's. The Jews had applauded Harry Truman's courageous endorsement of Israel in 1948 and gathered around Bobby Kennedy

in the 1960's, but had never involved themselves emotionally and physically as was the case with Dr. King. With uncharacteristic exuberance, and real bravery, Jews trusted and worked for Martin Luther King.

Albert Vorspan, vice president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and director of its Commission on Social Action, was an associate of King in the civil rights movement. He recalls that the Black - Jewish alliance was at the heart of the movement. "He had an extraordinary impact upon us," Vorspan recalls. "Like no other non - Jewish partner, American Jews gave to Dr. King a blank check of commitment."

high in the dangerous Mississippi summer of 1964 and in every anti - discrimination effort of those times. The notorious and cold - blooded executions in Philadelphia, Miss. of three young civil rights workers in 1964 took the lives of two Jews and one Black. At the great March on Washington in 1963 and in St. Augustine and Birmingham and Selma and Montgomery and Memphis, Jewish involvement in the lifeline of Martin Luther King's campaign for human dignity was signal. Through it all, it was the vision and awesome dynamism of Dr. King himself that moved Jews and others beyond themselves.

The admiration Jews felt for Dr. King, and the strong historical affinity of the Jews to the Black experience, was by no means one-sided. When he spoke at the convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in Chicago in 1963, King related his dream to the proven ability of Jews to transcend discouragement and despair. In his later writings, the Black preacher wrote: "The lesson of Jewish mass involvement in social and political action and education is worthy of emulation." King encouraged his own brothers and sisters to become active politically, as Jews had done, in order to assure a more equal role in society.

In 1983, however, it can be fairly asked what has become of Dr. King's historic struggle. Does the dream he articulated and shared with so many of so many differing backgrounds speak to us still? Certainly, the times are different, the issues blurred by overriding economic obsessions. But one is saddened by those whose recollections of those urgent and heady days have diminished into nostalgia. Not enough youngsters, Black or White, know much about Martin Luther King today, and America in general has fallen into a resigned non-concern.

That Martin Luther King's dream of full equality in a free society for all Americans remains a vision too far from realization is our failure, not his. But because we Jews shared so much of what was his, we remember him now, on his birthday, with special warmth and identification and love.



Jan. 15, 1929—April 4, 1968

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"I have a dream ..."

A remarkable Black-Jewish partnership was galvanized by Dr. King. In the great struggle to de-segregate the South, rabbis were hosed and beaten and jailed alongside King and the many other freedom fighters of all backgrounds who joined the battle against the tyranny of racism. Jewish representation was disproportionately

UNITED NATIONS (WNS)-- The PLO failed to gain the support of the Arab countries for its proposal that the General Assembly reserve a seat in the Assembly hall for "Palestine." Moderate Arab states, particularly Jordan, were reportedly opposed to such a move and lobbied against the PLO initiative. The PLO effort took place during the recently concluded 37th session of the General Assembly.

ALIZA BEGIN - A TRIBUTE

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husband. She had gone through a great deal for him and for her country as she worked side by side with him. I think she dedicated her life to him and to Israel and used all her energies, which were considerable, to the end."

Harry Hurwitz, Minister of Information at the Israeli Embassy and a friend to the Begins for 37 years said that Mrs. Begin was "an outstanding personality in her own right and will be especially missed by those who knew her and worked with her on her many charitable projects."

Aliza Begin was born in 1920 in Poland. Her identical twin sister died in the Holocaust. Her father, Dr. Zvi Arnold, an attorney, introduced Aliza, age 17, to law school graduate Menachem Begin. When Aliza was 19, they married at the Drohobycz Grand Synagogue in Poland. In 1943, the Begins managed to reach what was then Palestine after Menachem had fought on the side of the Polish forces. In what was later to become Israel, Aliza Begin changed her identity five times in five years, much of it spent underground in hiding from the British as the wife of the commander of the Irgun, an underground group that harassed the local British authorities until they left in May, 1948.

Yet, Aliza Begin, who described herself as a "born optimist" insisted that politics was not her line. "I don't make statements for my husband," she said, adding that "one politician in the family is sufficient."

Betty Lightfoot, who did Mrs. Begin's hair at the Washington Hilton beauty salon, recalls how Mrs. Begin was "unpretentious and gracious." "It was a delight to chat with her while I dressed her hair," Mrs. Lightfoot said. "But she didn't want to talk about herself -- only about the Prime Minister and the good-will he wanted to generate."

Eleanor and Harry Foster (Mineral Resources of St. Louis), concur. They were with Mrs. Begin at a White House State Dinner during the Carter presidency. "When we chatted with her, she would only talk about her husband and his aspirations for peace in the Middle East," they recall. "We couldn't get her to converse about herself or even her projects in Israel. She was totally devoted to the prime minister."

The sentiments of Simona Hasten, Mrs. Begin's best friend in the U.S.A., sum up the "Woman of Valor" as a credit to her family and to her country:

"Aliza was a thoroughly good human being with a beautiful soul and a kind heart, filled with compassion. Besides being her loving husband's right hand, and considerate of his every need, she was a wonderful mother who instilled in her children decent values."

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