

MLK and the Soviet Jewry Movement



As record numbers of Soviet Jews continue to pour into Israel, Jews in particular have reason to join in the celebrations of Martin Luther King Jr. day. For it should be recalled that Dr. King, the supreme voice of the civil rights movement in the United States, was also an early and influential supporter of the Soviet Jewry movement, the effort to achieve human rights, including the right of emigration, for the more than two million Jews living in the U.S.S.R.

We are confident that the climactic successes of this movement - the move to Israel of 200,000 Soviet Jews in 1990 and the even greater number anticipated in 1991 - would have brought considerable gratification to Dr. King. So, too, would the fact that for the first time in three generations, Jews in the Soviet union are being allowed to teach Hebrew to their children, create their own art forms, develop their own culture and establish Jewish communal bodies.

From virtually the very beginning of the movement to free Soviet Jews in the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. was a major advocate on their behalf. Many years ago this month, he publicly sought support for the reestablishment of the "religious and cultural freedom" of the Soviet Jewish community. We went on to "urge that the Soviet government end all the discriminatory measures against the Jewish community."

The next year Dr. King addressed, by telephone hook-up, dozens of Soviet Jewry Human Rights Rallies across the United States. In his compelling remarks, he indicated that the Soviet government deprived Jewish communal life of elementary needs required to sustain even a modest existence. He admonished his fellow Americans not to "sit complacently by the wayside" while their Jewish brothers and sisters

in the Soviet Union faced the possible dissolution of their spiritual and cultural life.

By remarks such as these, Dr. King helped play a significant role in legitimating the effort to alleviate the plight of Soviet Jews - in moving it from the fringes of our society's concerns to the center. He thus made it acceptable for many people with diverse backgrounds to support this movement at a time when general endorsement by American society was either lacking or uncertain.

In retrospect, Dr. King's adoption of the cause of Soviet Jewry is not surprising, given his belief that the freedom of blacks was inextricably tied to the universal right of all groups to be free from discrimination and oppression. This belief, exemplified by Dr. King's extraordinary leadership, was instrumental in the shaping of the close relationship between blacks and Jews that developed during the King years, a closeness that included co-operation in campaigns to end discrimination in employment and housing and to improve educational opportunities.

In fact, Dr. King was the embodiment of this cooperation. Ten years before his 1968 death, he enunciated the basis of the (natural) relationship between black and Jewish communities. Blacks and Jews, he said, shared an "indescribably important destiny to complete a process of democratization ... which is our most powerful weapon for world emulation."

Surely, as we ponder the message of Martin Luther King's life and work, we must come to realize that it is gain time for both groups to return to the effort.

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"Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all...It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

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