

ON THE FRONTLINES OF FAITH

*The Historical and Spiritual Bonds Between
African-Americans and Jews*



By Dr. Edward L. Branch
Introduction and Reflections by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



International Fellowship
of Christians and Jews®

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By Dr. Edward L. Branch

Senior Pastor of Third New Hope Baptist Church,
Detroit, MI

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Founder and President,
International Fellowship of Christians and Jews



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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
On the Frontlines of Faith	8
Prologue	8
A Movement Is Born	9
“At the Side”	11
On the Frontlines of Faith	13
Everyone’s Neighbor	17
A Shared History	21
Our Spiritual Ties	25
A Call to Action	28
Passing the Baton	32
The Historic Bonds Between Black and Jewish Leaders	34
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel	34
Rabbi Joachim Prinz and Community Organizers	
A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin	35
Goodman-Cheney-Schwerner, American Civil Rights Workers	38
Black Americans to Support Israel Committee	40
Final Reflections from Rabbi Eckstein	41

*How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!*
— Psalm 133:1

INTRODUCTION

The incredible coalition between African-American and Jewish spiritual leaders was forged and solidified well over 50 years ago on the frontlines of faith during the Civil Rights Movement. But in a very personal way, those bonds illuminated a calling from God through an event over 35 years ago that changed my life forever.

It was then that an African-American pastor first opened my eyes to the love Christians have for Israel and her people. Prior to founding *The Fellowship*, I was asked to lead a tour of Christians to the Holy Land. At the time, I was a 25-year-old newly ordained rabbi from New York City, and this was the first time I had ever been to Israel with people who were not Jewish. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, I found my roommate was an 86-year-old African-American Baptist pastor from Virginia. Coming to Israel, he told me, had been his lifelong dream; he had saved for years to make the trip.

Still, his connection to Israel was a bit of a mystery to me. At the time I asked myself, what could we possibly have in common? The answer came on the first night of the tour. I walked into my room and found my friend praying through tears of joy, thanking God for the chance to visit this holy land.

“... An African-American pastor first opened my eyes ...”

— Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

“You only let Moses see the Promised Land,” he prayed. “You’ve let me walk in it. Thank you, God.”

The fervor and the passion of his prayer told me what I needed to know. What did we have in common? We had our shared

biblical heritage and our love for Israel. It was this experience, among many others, that led me to begin bringing together in common cause Jews and Christians, whose relationship had for far too long been characterized by animosity and division.

That seminal event, along with the bond between Jewish and African-American spiritual leaders during the Civil Rights Movement, came to my mind recently as I had the rare privilege of addressing three major African-American congregations in the Detroit area: New St. Paul Tabernacle, Third New Hope Baptist Church, and Family Victory Fellowship. I was warmly welcomed by their leaders, Bishop P.A. Brooks, Pastor E.L. Branch, and Pastors Larry and Sylvia Jordan, respectively.

*“What did we
have
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— Rabbi Yechiel
Eckstein

Standing in these spiritual gatherings, I recalled the historic coalition between the African-American church and the Jewish state. This coalition played a key role in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, when Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched arm-in-arm with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and when Jewish civil rights workers Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner died alongside African-American civil rights worker James Chaney in their fight for justice.

*“Tragically, this bond has been
forged by a shared knowledge of
bigotry, hatred, and injustice.”*

— Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

Since that tumultuous era, it has been clear that the African-American church takes very seriously the biblical imperative to stand with Israel,

and they have consistently shown through their support and prayers that Israel is not alone. In each of these churches I reminded those gathered of our rich shared history and expressed my gratitude

for the strong bridges that have been built between our two communities. Tragically, this bond has been forged by a shared knowledge of bigotry, hatred, and injustice.

And because of that rising hatred and anti-Semitism, I told these congregations that Israel needs their support now more than ever. It is only with a combined and concerted effort that we will be able to combat the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe, on college campuses across the U.S., and in our international media.

This is why we launched our African-American Outreach – to foster relationships with the African-American community, to encourage cooperation between both communities on issues of shared values, to deepen their Christian bonds with Israel and the Jewish people, and to help them understand the Jewish roots of their Christian faith.

“... it is such a joy to see these bonds fostered and strengthened within the African-American Christian community.”

— Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

After all these years, it is such a joy to see these bonds

fostered and strengthened within the African-American Christian community. My pastor friend, I am certain, would have been greatly pleased.

I, too, am pleased – by the privilege to speak to these strong communities of faith, and to continue the bridge-building work to which God called me over 40 years ago. Together, let us pray for the day when Jewish and Christian communities of all colors are free from prejudice and hatred, and when we all will know God’s most precious gift of *shalom*, peace.

Rabbi Eckstein

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein
Founder and President

ON THE FRONTLINES OF FAITH

Prologue

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s was one of the pivotal events of the 20th century. It focused upon the citizen rights of black people in America who suffered beneath the heavy load of racism and oppression. Negroes, as we were called at that time, were second-class citizens, although the laws of the land provided for equal rights to everyone.

Even with laws in place, Negroes were still denied the rights to fair housing, jobs, and many of the rights that belonged to them as



citizens of this country. There were public restrooms and drinking fountains upon which signs were placed denoting “Whites Only” and “Coloreds Only.” Segregation in public transportation was widespread throughout the South where white people rode at the front of the bus while black people rode in the back.

Restaurants, hotels, and numerous other businesses could — and would — often deny service to Negroes simply based upon the color of their skin. Local governments supported this treacherous system by refusing to honor laws granting equal rights and often allowed the white perpetrators to get away with crimes against Negroes without any reprisal at all.

Lynchings and burnings of crosses were known to be the practices of some white supremacist organizations like the Klu Klux Klan, who with blatant determination, vowed to keep America pure white at all costs. News of black leaders being savagely beaten or lynched or otherwise killed was almost commonplace.

A Movement Is Born

It was against this backdrop of an oppressive and hate-filled environment that the Civil Rights Movement arose. While there were efforts that proceeded what is generally referred to as the civil rights era to overcome these bitter conditions, it was not until the early 1950s that any national organized strategies were employed. The emergence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marked the beginning of an era that would change things in America forever.

But it took an African-American woman to ignite the movement. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery (Alabama) bus and was arrested. When the Montgomery Improvement Association was formed, they sought leadership from the new pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The arrest and conviction of Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery

“People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that is not true ... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

— Rosa Parks

bus boycott. The boycott, which began a few days later on December 5, 1955, was successful, leaving numbers of city buses sitting idle while Negroes rode

in taxis owned by other Negroes, or walked, as many of them chose to do. Some walked as far as 20 miles each day. Later, when Rosa Parks was asked why she refused to give up her seat, she said in her own words:

“People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that is not true. I was not old, although some people

have an image of me being old then. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

The Montgomery bus boycott led to numerous protests of the segregated conditions in and around Montgomery and soon spread to other cities across the South. Sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and numerous other activities sprouted from the racism and oppression felt by black people during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

With the rise of new organizations opposing segregation and the renewed focus of existing ones, protest marches became a part of the general strategy to bring the vicious and vile treatment of Negroes to the forefront in America. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), led by Roy Wilkins, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), then led by Dr. King, and several other groups were on the frontlines of the movement. However, the struggle for freedom was bigger than those individuals or organizations who headlined it.



“At The Side”

Included among those who joined in the fight for freedom were people of other races and ethnicities. The problem of civil rights for Negroes was one that affected many, including white people, who believed in justice and equality so deeply that they risked themselves for its sake. On March 25, 1965, Dr. King led thousands of demonstrators from Selma, Alabama to the state capitol in Montgomery where the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had been campaigning for voting rights.

“There was never a moment in American history more honorable and inspiring than the pilgrimage of ... every race and faith pouring into Selma to face danger at the side of its embattled Negroes.”

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

It was to the crowd gathered at the conclusion of the march that Dr. King said, “There was never a moment in American history

more honorable and inspiring than the pilgrimage of clergymen and laymen of every race and faith pouring into Selma to face danger at the side of its embattled Negroes.” Dr. King’s emphasis on the fact that other races and religions were present is worthy of discussion.

We do not know, however, we are free to speculate on how effective the movement might have been without the presence and support of our brothers and sisters of other races and religions. The frontlines of the movement included numbers of others who were passionate and determined to once and for all settle the race issue in America by standing up for freedom and justice. While it was the civil rights of Negroes at the center of the struggle of the 1950s and 60s, freedom and justice was everybody’s business. It took courage and strength for Negroes to take a stand for justice and equality on their own behalf; it took that and more for those who did not benefit directly from the struggle to stand, as Dr. King stated, “at the side” of Negroes.

A REFLECTION FROM RABBI ECKSTEIN

“When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” — LEVITICUS 19:33-34

The Celebration of Passover bids us in the Jewish community to remember the good and the bad, our joys and our tribulations, our past sufferings and our hopes for the world’s future redemption. In recalling our own exodus from slavery and bondage, we are to actively seek freedom for all those to whom it is presently denied. This is the meaning of the command to love the stranger and the foreigner in our midst, since we were once strangers in Egypt. And while this can mean our spiritual freedom, we also regard the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed as equally enslaved and in need of redemption.

In recalling our own exodus from slavery and bondage, we are to actively seek freedom for all those to whom it is presently denied.

— Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

The very essence of Passover and our longing for freedom — both physical and spiritual — is expressed beautifully in the closing reading of the seder liturgy: “Our Passover service is completed. We have reverently repeated its ordered traditions. With songs of praise we have called upon the name of God. May He who broke Pharaoh’s yoke forever shatter all fetters of oppression, and hasten the day when war will be no more. Soon may He bring redemption to all mankind — freed from violence and from wrong, and united in an eternal covenant of brotherhood.”

On The Frontlines Of Faith

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of those who took to the frontlines of the struggle for freedom during the Civil Rights Movement. Who was this bearded man with rimmed glasses and a staunch appearance, who on occasion was arm-in-arm with Dr. King on the frontlines?



Rabbi Heschel (January 11, 1907—December 23, 1972) was one of the most influential religious figures of the 20th century. Born in Warsaw, Poland, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Berlin in 1933. He was a scholar, theologian, activist, poet, historian and author; he was a religious teacher “in the prophetic tradition.”

He may be best known for the iconic photograph of him marching with the



Dr. King in Selma in 1965. He later said, "I felt my legs were praying." Rabbi Heschel wrote 10 books, including *"Man in Search of God," "The Sabbath"* and others. He was professor of Jewish Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City after serving as an instructor at Cincinnati's Hebrew College for five years.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters have consistently been
"at the side"
of the black community.
— Dr. E.L. Branch

According to one source, the Jewish communities of the South were rather small. The majority of Jews who migrated from Europe occupied the larger cities of the North, like New York or Chicago. Most southern Jews remained quiet and stayed out of the public square during this season of controversy over racial equality. Other southern Jews were frightened to put themselves on the line and preferred neutrality. And, of course, there were pockets of Jews, as there were of blacks, who disagreed with the movement entirely. However, with support from northern Jews, the voice of the Jewish community was heard loud and clear.

If anyone were to ask the question, "Where was the Jewish community during the Civil Right Movement?" the response would come loud and clear, "They were on the frontlines of faith."

Our Jewish brothers and sisters have consistently been "at the side" of the black community. According to an article published by the Religious Action Center:

"American Jews played a significant role in the founding and funding of some of the most important civil rights organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People (NAACP), the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, the Southern Christian Rights, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In 1909, Henry Moscowitz joined

***“... morally
speaking ... some
are guilty, but
all are
responsible.”***

— Rabbi Abraham
Joshua Heschel

W.E.B. DuBois and other civil rights leaders to found the NAACP. Kivie Kaplan, a vice chairman of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism), served as the national president of the NAACP from 1966 to 1975. Arnie Aronson worked with A. Philip Randolph and Roy Wilkins to found the Leadership Conference.

“During the Civil Rights Movement, Jewish activists represented a disproportionate number of those who

were involved in the struggle. Jews made up half of the young people who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. Leaders of the Reform Movement were arrested with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964 after a challenge to racial segregation in public accommodations. Most famously, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched arm-in-arm with Dr. King in his 1965 March on Selma.”

One of my favorite quotes from Rabbi Heschel says, “... morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”

A REFLECTION FROM RABBI ECKSTEIN

*Ahab said to Elijah, "So you have found me, my enemy!"
"I have found you," he answered, "because you have sold
yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD." — 1 KINGS 21:20*

In the book of 1 Kings, we read about the evil King Ahab, who had his eye on his neighbor's vineyard. The king offered to buy it, but his neighbor, Naboth, refused the offer. This made Ahab so angry that he went home to sulk in bed and refused to eat.

When his wife Jezebel got wind of this, she wrote letters in her husband's name commanding the elders of Naboth's town to set him up and make it look like he cursed God and the King.

Naboth was framed and then stoned to death for his alleged crime. His vineyard was then free for the taking. Ahab had gone to the vineyard to claim it as his own when Elijah found him there.

***"The only thing necessary
for evil to flourish is for
good men to do nothing."***

— Edmund Burke

Elijah conveyed the following message from the Lord: *"In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood."* Ahab responded cryptically, *"So you have found me, my enemy!"* Translated: "you are biased and only find me guilty because we are enemies – the truth is I didn't do it!" To which Elijah replies, *"I have found you ... because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD."*

Elijah told Ahab what Edmund Burke would famously express thousands of years later: "The only thing necessary for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing." To be silent is to concede.

We are living in times when evil has reared its ugly head once again. Overseas and in our own backyards, there is no shortage of injustice and oppression. We must speak up. We dare not remain silent, lest we be held responsible.

Everyone's Neighbor

We need not look far to discover the participation and presence of the Jewish community in the Civil Rights Movement. Back on August 28, 1963, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, attended by more than 300,000 souls, was on the way.

It was a hot day. Author Taylor Branch, in his book, *"Parting the Waters,"* described the day as such:

"Mounted in the eagle's eye of the Washington Monument, a CBS television camera showed viewers a thick carpet of people on both sides of the half-mile reflecting pool and all around the base of the Lincoln Memorial. At noon, nearly two hours before the rally began, the police estimated the crowd at more than 200,000. From this official number, friendly observers argued plausibly that late arrivals and high density justified talk of 300,000, and the usual effusions ran it upwards to 500,000.



By whatever count, the numbers reduced observers to monosyllabic joy.” (p. 377)

Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle of Washington, D.C. was scheduled to give the invocation along with numbers of other speakers who would have their once-in-a-lifetime chance to address

**“...when God created man,
He created him as
everybody’s neighbor.”**

— Rabbi Joachim Prinz

this audience, and for that matter, the nation and the world. Among those speaking that day was John Lewis (SNCC), James Farmer (CORE), Walter Reuther (AFL-CIO),

Whitney Young (National Urban League), Roy Wilkins (NAACP) and Dr. King (SCLC). Also included to speak on that day before this massive crowd was Rabbi Joachim Prinz, president of the American Jewish Congress. Here’s a few lines from his speech:

I speak to you as an American Jew. As Americans we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which makes mockery of the great American idea. As Jews we bring to this great demonstration, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a twofold experience — one of the spirit and one of our history. In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, He created him as everybody’s neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity.

From our Jewish historic experience of three-and-a-half thousand years we say: Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages,

my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history began with a proclamation of emancipation. It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is above all and beyond all such sympathies

“... the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.”

— Rabbi Joachim Prinz

and emotions a sense of complete identification and solidarity born out of our own painful historic experience.

Rabbi Prinz continued:

“When I was a rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was 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 had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality, and in the face of mass murder. America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent, not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the sake of the Negro, not for the sake of the black community, but for the sake of the image, the idea, and aspiration of America itself.”

A REFLECTION FROM RABBI ECKSTEIN

“How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father.” — GENESIS 44:34

I'd like to revisit those crucial words uttered by Joseph's brother, Judah, thousands of years ago, words that have reverberated throughout the years: “How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me?” On one level, it is a brother's plea for mercy for his father's sake. On another level, it is the question that we all need to ask ourselves: “How can we return to our Father in heaven if our brothers and sisters are not with us?” In other words, it's not enough for us as individuals to live good and godly lives. We are also responsible for the lives of our brothers and sisters.

We read in Deuteronomy 14:1, “You are the children of the

LORD ...” Think about that for a moment. We are ALL God's children. As brothers and sisters, we must worry and care for each other. How can we return to our Father in heaven without being able to say that we did our best

... charity is not just a kindness in Judaism.

It is justice ...

— Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

to help our brothers and sisters?

In Hebrew, the word for charity is *zedakah*, which shares the same root as the Hebrew word for justice. This is because charity is not just a kindness in Judaism. It is justice; it's our social and spiritual obligation. We must extend a helping hand to others. We must care for their physical needs and spiritual well-being. We must look after the oppressed, the hurting, and those less fortunate than we. Only then, when we do come to the heavenly gates, will we be able to tell our Father that, yes, we have brought His children home, too.

A Shared History

If any people could connect with and identify with the plight of black people in America, it's our Jewish brothers and sisters, who, as Rabbi Prinz said, possess a history of slavery, oppression, ghettos, hate and depravation. Rabbi Prinz was purposeful in announcing the presence of thousands of Jews who were in attendance at the March on Washington. He highlighted the fact that the presence and support of the Jews for the cause of freedom was bigger than what meets the eye.

For the Jews present and others who supported the cause, there was "complete identification and solidarity." I was moved by the Rabbi's words on silence. There was a serious indictment of America in those words. An indictment that reaches through time and space to any and all who choose to remain aloof and detached in the face of injustice. It was a wake-up call.

To further respond to the question of "where were the Jews during the Civil Rights Movement?" we can revisit the interview of Dr. King that was published in *Playboy* magazine by Alex Haley. In it Dr. King paid homage to the many Jews who had sacrificed greatly for the cause of civil rights. The following is an excerpt from that landmark interview in January 1965.

Dr. King states:

How could there be anti-Semitism among Negroes when our Jewish friends have demonstrated their commitment to the principle of tolerance and brotherhood not only in the form of sizable contributions, but in many other tangible ways, and often at great personal sacrifice? Can we ever express our appreciation to the rabbis who chose to give moral

witness with us in St. Augustine, during our recent protest against segregation in that unhappy city? Need I remind anyone of the awful beating suffered by Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Cleveland when he joined the civil rights workers there in Hattiesburg, Mississippi? And who can ever forget the sacrifice of two Jewish lives, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, in the swamps of Mississippi? It would be impossible to record the contribution that the Jewish people have made toward the Negro's struggle for freedom – it has been so great.



Dr. King recognized the presence, support, and sacrifices of our Jewish brothers and sisters during the movement. He knew of those with whom he held hands and locked arms. Dr. King remembered the Jews who marched alongside him and numerous others, whether it was in Alabama, Mississippi or in Chicago. Dr. King honored those Jews who gave their lives for the cause of freedom and justice. If we were to ask Dr. King, where the Jews were during

the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King would say, "At our side. They were at our side."

Rabbi Marc Schneier wrote in his book, *"Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King Jr. & The Jewish Community,"* (Jewish Lights, Woodstock, VT, 1999):

"For the record, the Jewish role in Dr. King's life and the movement as a whole was substantial. Dr. King counted Jews among his closest allies and he identified strongly with the historic experience of the Jewish people against oppression since the Biblical Exodus."

— Rabbi Marc Schneier

He further stated that "the relationship between Dr. King and the Jews was reciprocal. However, the Jewish community's engagement with the civil rights movement was complex."

The majority of the Jews who went south to help blacks, who demonstrated in their own communities on behalf of civil rights, and who gave money to the Civil Rights Movement were neither rabbis nor Orthodox Jews. Most activist Jews were not religious. They were unaffiliated students, lawyers and others whose activism was based in the Jewish ethos of pursuing justice, according to Rabbi Schneier.

A REFLECTION FROM RABBI ECKSTEIN

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?”

— ISAIAH 58:6-7

We have a beautiful, nuanced expression in Hebrew, Lo titalaim, which is best translated “from your flesh you shall not avert your eyes.” But isn’t that what we often do? We pretend not to see the plight of the poor, the oppressed, or the hurting, because it is much more comfortable to look away than to look into their eyes and see their needs. To do so makes us uncomfortable, doesn’t it, because we are faced with a choice: Will we look away or will we get involved?

And while the words of the prophet Isaiah were addressed to the people of Judah, many of whom were merely going through the motions of worshipping God, his words are applicable — and challenging — to us today as well.

God warns us “*not to turn away from your own flesh and blood*” because we are all made in the image of God. We share a common bond of humanity. By ignoring the needs of one, we harden our hearts to that which makes us human — the image of God as expressed in compassion toward others.

We may even pray that God would bless such people and meet their needs, but how can God meet their needs if we do not extend our hands to help? God has blessed us so that we can be a blessing to others.

God warns us “not to turn away from your own flesh and blood” because we are all made in the image of God.

— Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

Our Spiritual Ties

Since the Civil Rights Movement, Jewish activists have continued to support the causes of black America and have maintained close ties with black clergy and the black church. Numbers of local religious organizations have brought together rabbis and pastors from almost every denomination. Personal relationships have been forged and meaningful understandings of life and faith have been at the center of interfaith connections. In the Detroit community, there are a number of local congregations that connect upon some frequency with the Jewish community.

I was blessed to have been invited to preach at the *seder* service for one of our suburban Jewish congregations, Temple Israel, located on Walnut Lake Road in West Bloomfield, Michigan. It was a learning and growing experience for me and our congregation. As you may know, the *seder* service is the primary observance of Passover, focusing on the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt. It takes us from slavery to freedom.

I preached from the well-known passage in the book of the prophet Micah, chapter 6, verse 8, "*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*" (KJV) The service was held outdoors as the sun was setting toward Sabbath. I shall never forget it and look forward to more fellowships with Temple Israel and Rabbi Josh Bennett.

In January 2013, a delegation of Baptist pastors, representing the four National Baptist Conventions, traveled to Israel to see firsthand the conditions of threat facing our Jewish brothers and sisters on a daily basis. While there, we visited Sderot, the town nearest the Gaza Strip, only to realize that the citizens of this small community

*“... what doth the
LORD require of thee, but to do
justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy
God?”*

— Micah 6:8 (KJV)

live every day under the threat of missiles fired from so close that every home is required to have a bomb shelter. Being less than a mile away from Gaza, they have only a matter of seconds from the sound of a siren to find safety. At the northernmost border with

Lebanon, we could easily see that Israeli homes were within striking distance from the wire fence that separated their borders.

In a thousand ways, the history of African-Americans and that of the Jews parallel. Hardly anything in life ties people closer together than the pain of a common struggle. While the Bible gives us the story of the Hebrew/Jewish record, we are ever mindful of our connection as the people of God. We are inextricably interwoven into the human fabric and our plight is determined by how well we live and work together. Dr. King said it well when he reminded us that “We will either live together as brothers (and sisters), or we will perish together as fools.”

*“We will either
live together
as brothers
[and sisters],
or we will
perish together
as fools.”*

— Dr. Martin
Luther King Jr.

A REFLECTION FROM RABBI ECKSTEIN

*Defend the weak and the fatherless;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked. — PSALM 82:3-4*

Psalm 82 expresses outrage at judges and officials who didn't do their jobs properly. As history has shown repeatedly, judges can be bribed, officers can be corrupt, and justice can be blind. As part of the psalmist's diatribe against such injustice, he pleaded: "*Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*" Thankfully, today, there are many officials who do their job with exactly this spirit. However, the reality is that there are also many others who do not.

I think, however, there is another way to understand this verse. While the simple meaning suggests that the psalmist is addressing judges, officers, and the like, I think that the psalmist's sentiments can be addressed to us. I believe that when those in high positions are not doing their job, it becomes *our* job.

As the Jewish sages taught thousands of years ago, "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." What this means is that when no one else is stepping up to the plate, and especially when those in powerful positions are not fulfilling their roles, we should step up and take on that responsibility as best as we can.

Please, let's read over the words in Psalm 82, verses 3 and 4, again. Read them aloud, and accept them as our personal mission. When the world largely ignores the suffering of the needy, it is our duty to pay attention, step up, and take action to alleviate suffering in whatever way we can. Where there is no justice, let's bring justice and bring glory to the kingdom of God.

***"... deliver
them from the
hand of the
wicked."***
— Psalm 82:4

A Call To Action

When duty calls, we must not be found idle, or worse, hiding. We must take our rightful places on the frontlines of faith. Our true strength is best shown when we stand together, arm-in-arm, against the evils of injustice and fight for the rights of every person to live out the fullness of their God-given potential with dignity and honor.

We can continue to add strength to the frontlines of faith by opening ourselves to learn about Israel and the Jewish heritage. While this same call goes to learning about other people's groups and religions in general, we should learn as much as we can about our Jewish brothers and sisters in particular. For Christians, Judaism is at the root of our faith and practice. We should also visit Israel. Our lives change forever for the better after a visit to the land of the Bible. The word of God opens and unfolds and blooms in us, as we see bodies of water and acres of land and hills and ridges in the Holy Land.

Our true strength is best shown when we stand together, arm-in-arm, against the evils of injustice.

— Dr. E.L. Branch

Then, finally, on a more personal and practical level, we can take to the frontlines of faith by building and maintaining authentic friendships with our Jewish brothers and sisters. We can all do better with this one. There's a serious problem when all our friends have similar backgrounds and the same faith as us. We should all have friends who are different from us, who think differently, behave differently, and believe differently. The differences that exist in our friends help to broaden our perspectives and enlarge our view.



Be deliberate about building friendships with our Jewish brothers and sisters because to us, brothers and sisters they are.

Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King met for the first time in January 1963 at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago where they were both invited to speak. The two men developed a close friendship that lasted throughout their lives. They were often spoken of as “kindred spirits,” and were so close that Rabbi Heschel gave words of eulogy at the funeral service of Dr. King.

*The differences
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— Dr. E.L. Branch

Dr. James Cone, the Charles Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY said, “True conversion rarely occurs without an honest encounter with a victim.” What we need is more and more honest encounters with people whom we have held suspect and

have looked at in ways other than the way we look at ourselves.

A REFLECTION FROM RABBI ECKSTEIN

*Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.*

— ISAIAH 52:9

The Western Wall in Jerusalem on Friday night is a sight to behold. Hundreds of people from all walks of life come to celebrate the Sabbath with prayers, songs, and dancing. On any given Friday night, you will find groups of people huddled together, smiling and singing

One particular time, I was praying at the Western Wall on a late summer Friday night, and I noticed a group preparing to go down

“We are all here for the same reason and we all want the same thing. We have one purpose and one goal.”

— Tour Guide at Western Wall

the many steps to the Wall. Their guide was giving them some last-minute advice, preparing them for the unusual experience they were about to encounter.

As the guide finished her cautionary words, she said some things that caught my attention:

“When you get closer to the wall, you will hear a lot of singing. At first it will sound like a bunch of different songs all being sung at the same time by different groups of people. But, if you listen with your heart, you will hear that it is really all *one* song, with many parts of harmony.”

She added: “We are all here for the same reason and we all want the same thing. We have *one* purpose and *one* goal.”

As I sung my own songs that Friday night, the guide’s words were ringing in my ear: *It’s all one song.*

This is what the prophet Isaiah was describing when he wrote, “Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem ...” The prophet described a time when there will be many songs of joy in Jerusalem again. That time is now!

*The prophet described
a time when there will
be many songs of joy in
Jerusalem again.*

— Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

As it says in the Psalms, “How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!” (Psalm 133:1 NLT). Whether you are in Jerusalem, America, whether you are black, white, rich, poor, join us in singing together in harmony. While we may sing different tunes, we are all singing parts of the same song – one that celebrates God, Jerusalem, and the coming of a time of peace, justice, and righteousness.



Passing The Baton

In this struggle for justice and freedom — and this struggle continues even today — we must remain committed to goodness and righteousness. When the Apostle Paul realized that his life and ministry was nearing an end, he wrote in his second letter to Timothy, “*I fought a good fight ...*,” meaning that he was a fighter in the good fight of faith. Paul was careful to choose to fight on the right side of the battle. He chose to fight on the side of good. He continued, “*I finished my course.*”

What the apostle was saying, in the language of the Isthmian Games of the ancient Greeks, is that “I have run my leg of the race. In essence, someone passed me the baton, and now I must pass the baton on to someone else.” Then he concluded, “*I have kept the faith.*” This was a declaration of faithfulness and perseverance, to which he declared, “If you keep the faith, the faith will also keep you.”

Let’s keep fighting for justice and freedom until we eradicate hatred and oppression once and for all. Let us keep the faith on the frontlines together.

In the beautiful words of Charles Albert Tindley (1851 - 1933), Methodist minister and gospel music composer:

*Harder yet may be the fight,
Right may often yield to might,
Wickedness awhile may reign,
Satan's cause may seem to gain,*

*There is a God that rules above,
With hand of power and heart of love,
If I am right, He'll fight my battle,
I shall have peace someday.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,
Nor what the future holds for me,
But this I know, if Jesus leads me,
I shall get home someday.*

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
"May those who love you be secure.
May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels."*

— Psalm 122:6-7

THE HISTORICAL BOND BETWEEN BLACK AND JEWISH LEADERS

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. met Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel at the National Conference on Religion and Race in 1963. Like many others in attendance, Dr. King was inspired by Rabbi Heschel's call to clergymen of all faiths "to do something they had never done before." The two men developed a lasting friendship that was united by suffering and oppression, but also spiritually connected by the teachings of the prophets and a hope for a better tomorrow.

The Selma-to-Montgomery marches were a significant intersection of faith and activism. Yet Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King's bond of brotherhood surpassed the Civil Rights Movement. They worked together to end the oppression of Jews in Soviet Russia and protested the war in Vietnam. Their shared religious beliefs were the embodiment of their political and social viewpoints, and their unique kinship became a touchstone for African-American and Jewish relations.



Rabbi Joachim Prinz and Community Organizers A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin

As a young rabbi in Berlin during the 1930s, Rabbi Joachim Prinz refused to be silent in face of rising discrimination against the Jews. As the Nazis came into power and began stripping Jews of their civil rights, Rabbi Prinz boldly spoke out to encourage the Jewish community to embrace their faith and the value of Judaism. He saved many Jewish lives by encouraging them to leave Germany.



After repeated arrests and constant monitoring, Rabbi Prinz himself immigrated to the United States in 1937. Settling in Newark, New Jersey, he served as the rabbi of Temple B'nai Abraham and later became vice chairman of the World Jewish Congress. He was an active member of the World Zionist Organization and a participant in the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington.



Rabbi Prinz devoted much of his life to the Civil Rights Movement as he began to realize that the ideals of American democracy was a reality not experienced by all of its citizens. He saw the plight of African-Americans and other minority groups in the context of his own experience under the Hitler regime. He spoke from his synagogue about the disgrace of discrimination and joined picket lines across America to protest racial prejudice wherever it existed, from unequal employment to segregated schools and housing.

While serving as president of the American Jewish Congress, Rabbi Prinz represented the Jewish community as an organizer of the March on Washington in August 1963, along with A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and many others.





He spoke immediately before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Rabbi Prinz’s address, based

***For Zion’s sake, I will not
keep silent.***

— Isaiah 62:1 (ESV)

on his experience under Hitler’s Nazi Germany, is remembered most for declaring 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.”

Throughout his life, Rabbi Prinz was a champion for justice, embracing the biblical adage, “*For Zion’s sake, I will not keep silent*” (Isaiah 62:1, ESV).

Goodman-Cheney-Schwerner, American Civil Rights Workers

Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, Jewish activists from New York, were trying to register voters in Philadelphia, Mississippi, together with James Earl Chaney, a local African-American civil rights worker, when they were abducted and brutally murdered by members of the Klu Klux Klan on the night of June 21, 1964. The three young men were part of a broader national movement that hoped to begin a voter registration drive in the area, part of the Mississippi Summer Project that became known as Freedom Summer.

A coalition of civil rights organizations, known as COFO (Council of Federated Organizations), conceived the project where massive numbers of student volunteers would converge on the state to register black voters and conduct “freedom schools.” The schools offered curriculum of black history and arts to children throughout the state.

Schwerner had been inspired to come to Meridian, Mississippi to set up the COFO office because he believed he could

Schwerner ... believed he could help prevent the spread of hate that had resulted in the Holocaust ...

— Dr. E.L. Branch

help prevent the spread of hate that had resulted in the Holocaust, an event that had taken the lives of his family members. Goodman and Schwerner, both members of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), had joined James Chaney as volunteers attempting to register African-Americans to vote when the men were stopped by the Meridian deputy sheriff on their way home from investigating a church bombing in neighboring Neshoba County.

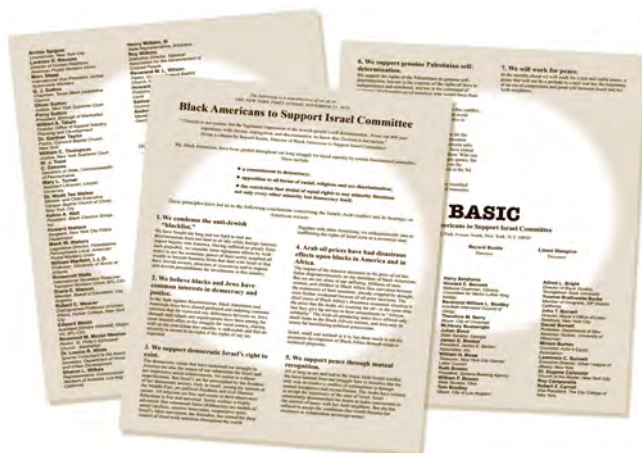


The three were arrested, detained, then released and basically handed over to a KKK mob, who brutally beat Chaney, then shot and killed all three, burned their car, and buried them in a shallow grave.

The disappearance of these activists sparked national outrage and a massive federal investigation. The FBI referred to this investigation as "Mississippi Burning," which, years later, the 1988 film of the same name was loosely based upon.



Black Americans to Support Israel Committee



The following is a reproduction of an ad in THE NEW YORK TIMES SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1975

In April 1975, prominent African-American leaders gathered in New York City at the request of A. Phillip Randolph, a key leader in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s, for the formation of an organization for black Americans to demonstrate support for Israel. Thus BASIC was born — Black Americans to Support Israel Committee.

"We are here to express our support for the State of Israel," said Bayard Rustin, executive director of REF (the Randolph Education Fund). "Whenever minorities seek justice, they have to defend democracy. We seek to defend democracy in the Mideast and therefore we support Israel."

Randolph, who noted that American Jewry had always supported the rights of African-Americans, said: "I would like to see the blacks of America register their support for the State of Israel. It will be a crime for anyone, and especially for blacks, not to support the just cause of Israel."

BASIC placed a full-page ad in The New York Times, in November 23, 1975, which was signed by influential African-Americans such as Lionel Hampton, Hank Aaron, Arthur Ashe, Harry Belafonte, Tom Bradley, Shirley Chisholm, Ralph Ellison, Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, Charles Rangel, Percy Sutton, Gardner Taylor, Roy Wilkins, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Ralph Abernathy, and more than 100 others.

FINAL REFLECTIONS FROM RABBI ECKSTEIN

Dr. King is rightfully known for his pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. What is less known — but well worth remembering — is that Dr. King saw a clear parallel between the struggle of his own people for equality and the struggle of another group familiar with oppression: the Jewish people.

John Lewis, a U.S. politician who worked side-by-side with Dr. King during the Civil Rights Movement, noted King's deep understanding of the shared experience of Jews and African-Americans in a 2002 article for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Lewis wrote that Dr. King "knew that both peoples were shaped by the tragic experience of slavery. He knew that both peoples were forced to live in ghettos, victims of segregation ... King understood how important it is not to stand by in the face of injustice. He understood the cry, 'Let my people go.'"

Dr. King was also a staunch supporter of the modern state of Israel, which was born during his lifetime. At a 1968 national rabbinical convention he said, "I see Israel as one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security and that security must be a reality."

This strong support of Israel and the Jewish people was reciprocated by countless American Jews, who were some of the earliest and most ardent supporters of Dr. King's efforts for equality for African-Americans. Jewish organizations offered material, moral, and financial support to the Civil Rights Movement. Members of the African-American and Jewish communities marched together to protest discrimination throughout the southern U.S. — and in some cases died together.

This alliance was, and is, built on a spiritual foundation, a shared history of faith, born from oppression. It is beautifully illustrated in the old African-American song that became one of the anthems of the Civil Rights Movement — a song that tells the story of the

Jewish people's release from bondage in biblical times — "Let My People Go."

Dr. King once wrote, "I solemnly pledge to do my utmost to uphold the fair name of the Jews . . . because bigotry in any form is an affront to us all."

May we remember these words in the days and the struggles ahead as we continue our efforts against discrimination and seek to honor and emulate our God of peace.

Pray for the peace of Detroit, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, America ...

"I solemnly pledge to do my utmost to uphold the fair name of the Jews ... because bigotry in any form is an affront to us all."

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

AFTERWORD

RENEWING OUR HISTORICAL AND SPIRITUAL BONDS

By Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Dr. Branch & Rabbi Eckstein in recording studio, December 2015

In 2014, with the help of prominent Christian leaders in the African-American community, I directed our staff at *The Fellowship* to begin an outreach initiative to engage the African-American community. Our inaugural advisory council members included: Bishop Carroll A. Baltimore; Dr. E.L. Branch; Rev. Deedee Coleman; Dr. Glenn Plummer; Bishop Kenneth Ulmer; Kristina King, Director, *The Fellowship*.

THE GOALS OF THIS OUTREACH INITIATIVE ARE TO:

- Strengthen relationships between today's African-American community and the Jewish people;
- Build bridges of understanding between the African-American community and Israel;
- Explore our spiritual bonds and heritage together around the Jewish roots of Christianity;
- Support projects of shared biblical concern with prayer, advocacy, and support.

Educational resources, like this booklet, and other creative multimedia resources, cultural opportunities (including leadership trips to Israel), educational seminars, leadership conferences, and workshops with both American-African and Jewish experts and scholars are important priorities in our work. Together, we clearly have a rich and meaningful history that should not be set aside.

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

— Psalm 133:1

We invite you to join us in this exciting and rewarding endeavor.

800-486-8844 | OUTREACH@IFCJ.ORG

BUILDING BRIDGES, SAVING LIVES

The *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews* was founded in 1983 by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein to promote understanding between Christians and Jews, and to build broad support for Israel through these ministry programs:

BLESSING JEWS IN NEED AROUND THE WORLD



Isaiah 58.



- ***On Wings of Eagles*** — Helping bring Jews to the Holy Land
- ***Isaiah 58*** — Providing lifesaving aid and assistance to impoverished Jews in the former Soviet Union
- ***Guardians of Israel*** — Assisting needy Jews in Israel with food and other lifesaving needs and providing security against terror attacks

UNDERSTANDING THE JEWISH ROOTS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH



- Devotions and Hebrew Word of the Day from Rabbi Eckstein
- ***Limmud***, online monthly biblical studies
- Teaching videos on the Jewish roots of Christianity
- Online resources on Jewish holy days and festivals
- ***Holy Land Moments*** daily radio program on Jewish life, culture, history, and faith

ADVOCATING FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL



- ***Stand for Israel*** — Mobilizing support to stand with Israel through advocacy
- ***Fellowship Prayer Team*** — Joining in prayer for Israel
- ***Israel in the News*** — Covering issues of the day relevant to Israel and her people

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ON THE FRONTLINES OF FAITH

The Historical and Spiritual Bonds Between African-Americans and Jews

When African-Americans in the early 1960s began their march toward equality and justice, it was the Jewish community who were “at their side.” Connected by a shared history of enslavement and segregation, Jewish leaders were on the frontlines of faith marching with black leaders and helping lead the fight against racial injustice. This bond is explored together by Dr. Edward L. Branch and Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein in this educational and inspirational recounting of that vital relationship.



Dr. Edward L. Branch

Dr. Edward L. Branch has been serving as the pastor of Third New Hope Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan since 1977. Pastor Branch is known for his dynamic preaching and practical teaching style. His vibrant sermons are intense and always relevant. He communicates the Gospel with sincerity and simplicity, much like the message contained within this teaching. Dr. Branch has a MA in Biblical Studies and a M.Div. and a Doctorate of Divinity in Religious Studies from Ashland Theological Seminary and is considered to be a New Testament scholar among his colleagues. Dr. Branch has been a leading advocate for women in leadership and integrity in all areas of ministry. A supporter of Israel and the dignity of all people, he serves on the African-American Advisory Council for the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (The Fellowship)*.



Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

In 1983, Rabbi Eckstein founded the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (The Fellowship)*, devoting his life to building bridges of understanding between Christians and Jews and broad support for the state of Israel. He is an internationally respected Bible teacher and acknowledged as the world's leading Jewish authority on evangelical Christians. Under his leadership, *The Fellowship* now raises over \$125 million annually, making it the largest Christian-supported humanitarian nonprofit working in Israel today.

Rabbi Eckstein is the author of 10 highly acclaimed books, including *How Firm a Foundation: A Gift of Jewish Wisdom for Christians and Jews*, and *The One Year® Holy Land Moments Devotional*. His newest book, *Passover — An Inspirational Guide* was released in March 2015, and an authorized biography titled *The Bridge Builder: The Life and Continuing Legacy of Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein*, written by respected author and journalist Zev Chafets, was released in August of the same year.



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