

# A JEWISH VIEW OF THE RACIAL CRISIS

CHARLES E. SILBERMAN

SEVERAL YEARS ago, a group of American Jews visiting Martin Buber in Jerusalem asked him to "say something," to give them a *D'var Torah* before they left. Professor Buber thought for a while, and then asked, "Why are we commanded, *Shema Yisrael!*? . . . Why *Shema*, hear?" And he answered his own question: "Because this is the most important thing of all: to hear, to listen. We do not listen. So we are *commanded* to listen, to hear. If only we were to obey this commandment; if only we were to listen . . ."

Buber's homily is compellingly relevant to the subject at hand: the frequently strained and tortured relations between Negro and Jew. I am afraid that too often we Jews are so busy talking—congratulating ourselves, for example, on our leadership in the fight for civil rights—that we don't have time to listen to what Negro Americans are trying to say. If we were really listening, we would hear how we sound when we talk to Negroes—and how differently we sound when we talk to whites. We hear Negroes as objects of our benevolence, or as instruments of our charitable purpose. We do not hear them as people—in Buber's terms, we do not establish an "I—Thou" relationship with them. We do not hear how patronizing we sound, nor do we see how angry Negroes become, when we assure them that *we* understand how they feel, for we, too, have experienced slavery and persecution.

The truth, I fear, is that we Jews are resting too much on past laurels. We think of ourselves as being in the vanguard of the fight for civil rights, for racial equality and justice. And for a long time we were. We take justifiable pride in the fact that, as Heinrich Heine put it, "since the Exodus, Freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent." But that Hebrew accent, like so many other parts of Jewish life and tradition, is beginning to weaken and fade. The fight for racial justice has radically changed character and direction in the past several years, but we Jews—and by "we Jews" I mean the leadership of the major Jewish religious and lay organizations, not just our benighted rank and file—have not changed with it. The ideology and the approach to race relations developed by most Jewish organizations is inadequate and irrelevant—in some ways, downright misleading—in

Mr. Silberman, an editor of *Fortune* magazine, is the author of *Crisis in Black and White*. This article, in slightly different form, was delivered last May at the 1965 Rabbinical Assembly convention.

the present situation. As a result, we are becoming alienated not only from the Negro protest movement but from the best elements in white Christian society as well.

These are harsh words, I know, and I assure you that they are not said lightly; I speak as a committed Jew. But my thesis does, I am certain, represent the truth. And the truth must be faced—now, while there is still time, for our failures threaten more than our relations with the Negro and the non-Jewish white communities. Our own survival is at stake, for our inaction undermines that passion for freedom and that commitment to justice which always have been a justification of our survival as a people.

There are some who will disagree with me, who will argue that, tiny handful that we are, our energies must be concentrated entirely on maintaining and protecting our own lives and institutions here in the United States and on defending the lives of those millions of Jews still being persecuted and oppressed in the Soviet Union and in Latin America. I do not mean to derogate the importance of these concerns; I argue only that they are not enough. There is a passage in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's magnificent volume, *The Prophets*, that seems to me to answer the argument that civil rights is not our fight.

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception, becoming the rule, and in turn being accepted. The knowledge of evil is something which the first man acquired; it was not something that the prophets had to discover. Their great contribution to humanity was the discovery of the evil of indifference. One may be decent and sinister, pious and sinful.

To understand what we, as Jews, must do about civil rights, we first need to understand what the racial crisis is all about. Let me begin, therefore, by posing the questions each of us, at some time or other, has asked—if only of ourselves. Why are Negroes so angry? Why do they need so much help? Why should Negroes have special treatment? After all (the conversation goes), my grandfather (or my father) came here without a nickel in his pocket, I grew up in a tenement on the Lower East Side. I never knew where the next meal was coming from, and look where I am now! Why don't they help themselves, the way we did? I mean, after all, we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt; we lived in ghettos in Europe; we know something about discrimination and persecution!

But do we? As Menasha Skulnik would put it, there's slavery—and

there's slavery! By itself, the fact of slavery does not explain "the crushing sense of nobodiness" with which Negroes are afflicted. We Jews, far from trying to erase the memory of slavery, have made it central to our religion. Each Passover every Jew is enjoined to recall the fact that "we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt"—each individual is to consider that he himself, not just his ancestors, had been enslaved.

Negroes have been unable to recall their experience in the same light. After all, the Jews, under Moses' leadership, freed themselves; we went from Egypt to Mount Sinai. Slavery was followed by a great moment of spiritual glory. The Negroes, on the other hand, had no Moses to turn the Mississippi River into blood, no wrathful God to smite the Southerners' firstborn. The Negroes did not free themselves; they were freed by others, as a by-product of a political dispute between two groups of whites. Emancipation was followed not by spiritual glory but by further spiritual degradation.

The fact is that Negro slavery in the United States was completely unlike slavery in any other part of the globe and in any other period of history. For slavery completely severed the Negro from his past and from his culture. (And make no mistake about it, Negroes did come from societies with cultures of a very high order.) This never happened to the Jews; neither slavery nor persecution destroyed our history, our religion, or our culture. On the contrary, our religion, in a sense, is our history—and our history is our religion. The Sages were correct when they told us that we cannot judge another unless we stand in his place. For all the terrible history of Jewish suffering, we do *not* stand in the Negroes' place.

For the past 350 years, including the 100 years since Emancipation, the American Negro has been subject to a system designed to destroy ambition, prevent independence, and erode intelligence. If Negroes seem to have less ambition than whites, appear more dependent, do poorly in school, we must remember that Negroes are what white Americans have forced them to become. The one sure way for the Negro to lose favor—and in rural areas of the South, where most Negroes lived until recently, the one sure way for him to risk attack or even death—was to show signs of ambition: that is, to seek to rise above his "place," to be "uppity." And if by any chance the Negro did manage to secure an education or better himself economically, he was well-advised to conceal the fact and act dependent, to scrape and bow and defer and smile and humble himself every day of his life. It is hard to imagine an environment better designed to destroy ambition, to persuade Negroes that aspiration is futile and self-improvement useless.

The essence of the Negro problem, in short, is the fact that white

Americans have never treated Negroes as men, have never permitted them to *be* men, to feel (in their bones as well as in their heads) that they *are* men, able to control their own destinies. Asked what it is that Negroes want, spokesmen from Frederick Douglas to W. E. B. DuBois to Martin Luther King have answered in almost identical terms: Negroes want their manhood; they want to be treated like men. The problem cuts deeper than most of us are willing to recognize, for intentionally or unintentionally, we all have kept Negroes in a state of dependency. White philanthropy, white liberalism, white sympathy and support, as well as white bigotry and discrimination, have had a similar effect of preventing Negroes from standing on their feet, from "exercising their full manhood rights," to use W. E. B. DuBois' phrase. Gunnar Myrdal summed it up twenty years ago in the introduction to *An American Dilemma*, when he pointed out that "practically all the economic, social and political power is held by whites."

It is thus the white majority group that naturally determines the Negro's place. . . In the practical and political struggles of effecting changes, the views and attitudes of the white Americans are . . . strategic. *The Negro's entire life, and consequently, also his opinions on the Negro problem are, in the main, to be considered as secondary reactions to more primary pressures from the side of the dominant white majority.*

The archaic sound of that last statement is a measure of how far we have gone and how much we have changed in twenty years—more accurately, in ten years, for Myrdal's statement still would have been true a decade or so ago.

It is true no longer. Negroes increasingly have taken the initiative, and white opinions and actions in regard to race more often represent reactions to "more primary pressures" from the side of the black minority. Indeed, the Negro revolt cannot be understood except as a long-suppressed reaction against the traditional imbalance of power between whites and blacks—an imbalance which whites take for granted but which Negroes have always resented. "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us," the first editorial in the first Negro newspaper to be published in the United States proclaimed in 1827. "You whites have always decided everything," a young black nationalist told me accusingly one hundred thirty-five years later. "You even decided when to set us free."

Indeed whites *have* decided everything—sometimes in malice, sometimes with the best intent, frequently because Negroes were unable or unwilling to decide for themselves. The reason is now irrelevant; what is crucial is that Negroes never had the sense of controlling their own destinies. The main thrust and meaning of the Negro protest movement is the demand for power: the insistence, for example, that whites

*negotiate* with Negroes, and that they negotiate with the leaders whom the Negro community selects, not with the Negro leaders whom the white community picks. When whites repeat their traditional call for "responsible" Negro leaders, the Negro response, in effect, is to ask: responsible to whom?

Negroes' demand for power, let me emphasize, is a crucial part of the struggle to overcome the devastation that the past 350 years have wrought on Negro personality. The apathy and aimlessness—the *anomie*, to use the sociologists' term—that characterize the Negro poor, and the crisis of identity that afflicts Negroes of all classes, stem from their sense of dependency and impotence, their conviction that "Mr. Charlie" controls everything, Negro leaders included, and that he has stacked the cards so that Negroes can never win. Negroes cannot overcome the apathy that keeps them locked in the slum—they cannot achieve their manhood, to use the phrase that has persistently recurred throughout Negro protest literature—until they are in a position to make or influence the decisions that affect them—until, in a word, they have power.

And power—not desegregated lunch counters, not integrated schools, not even equal (or, for that matter, preferential) access to jobs—is what "the Negro revolt" is all about. The acquisition of political, social and economic power represents the principal solution to the problem of Negro personality and identity—to "the Negro's Negro problem." The fact that Negroes constitute so large, and so rapidly growing a proportion of the population of the large cities provides an opportunity for the acquisition of political power that no other ethnic group has ever had, except in isolated instances—for example, the Irish in Boston or the Jews in New York City.

The essence of the Negro revolt lies in the fact that the Negro is no longer addressing himself to the white man's prejudice; he is no longer primarily interested in changing either the minds or the hearts of white Americans. He is, instead, trying to change white *behavior*. And, in that effort, he is recognizing that the rights and privileges of an individual depend primarily upon the status achieved by the group to which he belongs—which is to say, upon the power that group is able to acquire and exercise.

The result has been a serious strain between Negroes and white liberals, including—at times, perhaps, particularly—Jewish white liberals. We have not caught up with this new emphasis on power, conflict and direct action. "Jewish liberalism," as Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath has put it, "was most impressive when the measure of commitment was verbal. Jewish groups excelled at heroic resolutions, and rabbis were eloquent in their sermons. But it is no longer a question of words. Resolutions do not suffice for revolutions; only resolution to *act* counts now. Civil

rights no longer means what goes on in Mississippi; it means what goes on in one's child's school, in one's apartment house, in one's business, and in one's heart." The civil rights battle is being fought in the streets of the ghettos of the big Northern cities, and on this ground the battle will be won. Our enchantment with words—with "dialogue," to use a term I've come to hate, and with seminars, discussion groups, forums, and the like—represents a repudiation of our own religious heritage. The Talmud, for example, enjoins us to "Be wise not only in words but in deed. Mere knowledge is not the goal, but action. . . . Let not your learning exceed your deeds." But our learning *has* exceeded our deeds; certainly our talking has exceeded our deeds.

In any case, we are not doing enough now. And I am measuring "enough" not by the standard of what we *should* be doing, but by the standard of what our white Christian brethren *are* doing. "Next to 'dialogue,'" *Newsweek* magazine wrote last December, in reporting on a conference of Protestant clerical and lay leaders in Philadelphia, "the most popular word used by U. S. churchmen today is 'involvement'—meaning active engagement in the multiple wars on poverty, discrimination, ignorance and unemployment."

Admittedly, "involvement" in and "active engagement" with the Negro protest movement is very much easier for Christian churches than for synagogues or lay Jewish organizations. Indeed, the churches have a "mission to the inner city," as it is now called, in a sense which the Jews do not, since Negroes are Christians. Because there are churches inside the ghetto, Christians have an involvement they cannot escape. But to point out the difference between Christian and Jew is not to excuse us from inaction; the difference simply means that it is more difficult for us to establish a relationship with the slum-dwelling Negroes.

To be sure, a great many individual Jews are deeply involved in the fight for racial justice. All too often, however, it seems as though those Jews who are involved in the racial struggle have no commitment to Judaism, while those who have the commitment to Judaism are rarely involved in the fight for civil rights. There are notable exceptions, of course—some of them in The Rabbinical Assembly. But to pick a striking example, painfully few of the young Jewish men and women who went to Mississippi last summer had any understanding that what they were doing was in the least connected with their Jewishness, or with the teachings of Judaism; many would have thought you insane had you even suggested that notion. Equally important, the training they received before they went to Mississippi was provided by the National Council of Churches. No Jewish organization played any role in that training, or in the summer project. And yet we mourn the loss of the new generation of Jewish youth, and wonder why they drift

away from any connection with Jewish life! Can we find no way by which young Jews can participate in the civil rights movement as Jews? (The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, I should add, is experimenting with one such approach, in its Mitzvah Corps.)

To some degree I am over-generalizing, I know. Many of you have been involved—as rabbis, hence as Jews—going as a group to Birmingham in 1963, to St. Petersburg in 1964, to Selma, Alabama in 1965, and for these acts of courage (and in some cases, heroism), we are all indebted to you. I do not mean to derogate the importance of these acts, therefore, when I suggest that they are not enough. But they are not enough, for the racial crisis will not be solved in Selma, or Birmingham, or St. Petersburg. It will be solved, if it is to be solved, in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Rochester, Syracuse, Kansas City, Los Angeles—and in the suburbs of those cities. When our involvement consists mainly of symbolic trips to Selma, Alabama, the result may be to reinforce the Negroes' cynical view that our moral indignation and sense of commitment vary inversely with our distance from the scene of conflict.

They have a point. In New York City, the rabbinate has been eloquent—verbally—on the subject of school integration. But with a few exceptions—most notably, Rabbi Heschel—the eloquence has been purely verbal; nothing has been done. And in some parts of the city—in Jamaica and the eastern half of Queens, for example—even the words have been missing. Last September, when several junior high schools in New York City were integrated and the white segregationist organization, PAT, was preparing to boycott and picket these schools, the Queens Association for Quality and Integrated Education tried to arrange for a group of rabbis, ministers and priests to be at each of the junior highs, to escort the children through the picket lines. A few days before school was to open, I received a frantic call from a close friend, a Presbyterian minister in charge of the Urban Mission department of the Presbytery of New York. He called to report a terribly embarrassing situation; there were any number of priests, any number of Protestant ministers available—but the group had been unable to get a single rabbi. Could I help?

Lest anyone think I am singling out New York City, let me give a few more examples. In Chicago, the Woodlawn Organization—the first successful attempt anywhere in the United States to mobilize the residents of a Negro slum into a large and effective organization—was sponsored and financed initially by the Presbytery of Chicago and the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago. To be sure, the organizational genius for TWO came from a Jew, Saul D. Alinsky—but Alinsky was acting, as he almost always has had to act, without any significant support from

the Jewish community, and in some instances, against its opposition. In Chicago, only one Jewish group—the Chicago Federation of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations—has supported Alinsky's work, and that only very recently. In Kansas City, where Alinsky was invited to organize the Negro slum by an ecumenical group consisting of the Episcopal Diocese, the Catholic Archdiocese, and the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, the Jewish community has simply been silent—in fact, invisible. Friends who are involved in organizing the Negro slums—with federal government, and now with Episcopal Church, financing—recently asked me whom to contact in the Jewish community of Syracuse.

Fortunately, there are signs of change. In Rochester and Buffalo, the Protestant Federation acted unilaterally to raise the money to underwrite Alinsky's work in organizing the Negro community. They did not ask the Jewish community to participate because they were convinced—based on experience in other cities—that the leaders of the Jewish community would either decline or, worse yet, talk it to death. The initial reaction of the Jewish community seemed to prove their judgment correct. In fact, the judgment was wrong. Thanks to the leadership of men like Rabbi Abraham Karp in Rochester and Lou Glickman of the Anti-Defamation League in Buffalo, the Jewish community—or at least important elements within it—is coming around to a position of supporting active engagement in the civil rights battle.

It will not be easy for us to become involved in this way.

I know all the arguments in favor of sitting it out: "We agree with the objectives, of course, but we disagree with the methods—with boycotts, rent strikes, picketing, name-calling and the like." A conference of Protestant theologians and lay leaders in Philadelphia last December considered these techniques of mass community organization, and concluded that they are essential and proper, however crude and coercive they may seem. For there is no alternative to these methods, as Dr. John Bennett, president of Union Theological Seminary argued, if we are sincere in wanting to change the condition of the Negro.

The established forms of power in our society are no less coercive because they get their way without very obvious use of power. They exercise their power by the almost automatic enforcing of the accepted rules in the society. They discharge employees; they evict tenants; they refrain from taking any positive remedial steps by dragging their feet—one of the chief ways in which the established authorities show their power... We need to realize that this power of the strong to protect their interests may be just as coercive as the most obvious form of violence. The weak who are trying to put together forms of power, to gain political strength, are constantly forced into positions in which they have to demonstrate or strike or boycott or initiate events which become accompanied



by violence in the streets. This use of power may appear more bloody, but it is less coercive and less destructive than the power to evict or the power to drag feet and to prevent any change.

Accepting the desirability, or even the inevitability, of conflict is no easy matter. On the contrary, it goes against the whole grain of intergroup relations as they have been practiced in the United States, particularly by Jewish organizations. It also seems to go against the temper of our time, with its emphasis on "consensus politics." But it is important to realize, as the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead put it, that "the clash of doctrines is not disaster; it is an opportunity." Equally important, we must realize that consensus—especially consensus about freedom—arises out of conflict.

More basic to our fear of conflict—certainly the kind of conflict that is involved in the civil rights struggle—is the awareness that it threatens not just our ideology, but our sense of security as well. While most Negroes are outside the main stream of middle-class American life, we Jews are now on the inside. An examination of our communal concerns is the most dramatic demonstration of how far we have traveled and where we have arrived. Our lay organizations are now demanding an end to our exclusion from the executive suites of the large corporations and from the social clubs where executives meet. And the rabbinate is worried that perhaps we have too much freedom—that our complete (or near-complete) acceptance threatens the survival of the group. But because we have not yet fully adjusted to the fact that we are insiders rather than outsiders in American life, we are still terribly insecure about our position. We want racial change, all right—but without trouble or turmoil, and without upsetting the existing organizations and institutional arrangements. We'd like to participate in the fight for racial justice, all right, but not if it means that we must soil the middle-class garments of respectability all of us—rabbis and laymen—have learned to wear.

I am not proposing that we blindly follow any and every Negro protest group, whatever its goals and tactics; such a course would be irresponsible on our part. But I am arguing that, far too often, our objection to the means—consciously or unconsciously—masks or rationalizes or comes down to an objection to the end. As Bismarck once remarked, "When you say that you agree to a thing in principle, you mean that you have not the slightest intention of carrying it out in practice." Writing from his Birmingham jail cell nearly two years ago, Martin Luther King, put it this way:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negroes' great stumbling block in the stride for freedom is not the White

Citizens' Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods or direct action;" who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom.

The decision to become engaged is difficult, but it is also unavoidable. Micah's injunction was not to be just, but to *do* justice. "To do justice," Rabbi Heschel reminds us, "is what God demands of every man; it is the supreme commandment, and one that cannot be fulfilled vicariously." Let me end what I'm afraid has turned into a sermon with these words from Moses' final charge to the people of Israel:

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not too hard for thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldst say: "Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldst say: "Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?" *Ki karov ailekha hadavar m'od b'fikha u'vilvavkha la-asoto*. But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

Let us, then, do it.