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The Future of Black-Jewish Relations

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We are deeply honored to have with us tonight Andrew Young, who comes not only as the Mayor of the City of Atlanta but also as a representative of the Black people of this land. It is not his first trip to a Rabbinical Assembly Convention; some years ago he accompanied Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he appeared before us. His words tonight were thoughtful and stimulating for all of us. Nonetheless, I want to share with you and with him my own impressions of the first time we met. Mr. Young may not remember it at all, but I do remember very well coming to Birmingham with a group of 18 Conservative rabbis (not an unimportant number, by the way) to be present with Dr. King and Southern Christian Leadership Conference people at a time of enormous difficulty in the Civil Rights movement and of great crisis in the Black community of Birmingham. We were there in part to find a bridge between the Jewish community of Birmingham that was deeply sympathetic to Black aspirations at the time but that felt itself caught by the far greater power of Bull Connor and the white supremacists of that period. We had come as well, I believe, summoned by Dr. King, in order to demonstrate our faith in all that we believed about God and about the world in the face of one of the most vicious expressions of racism this country has known. We came as Jews proclaiming our own faith, singular and unique, but a faith that meshed well with the faith of our Black brothers and sisters, very much preoccupied with parallels to their cause in the Hebrew Bible.

We arrived late at night, leaving, by the way, directly from the Rabbinical Assembly Convention held in the Catskills, not a very different Convention in fact from this one. There we were taken through a tense and embattled city by a group of Black SCLC workers to a motel in the Black section of town. I remember falling asleep almost immediately, overwhelmed by the fatigue of the prior day, to be awakened rather early the next morning by a smiling face of young Andrew Young. Unlike this evening, he was dressed in the uniform of coveralls worn by SCLC workers and he became for a while, at least, a kind of guide and mentor for all of us. What happened in the next days has of course long ago become history. Yet it still retains a kind of legendary quality in the annals of the Rabbini-

cal Assembly and I think in the annals of American Jewry as well.

We wandered through the streets of Birmingham with yarmelkes on our heads that quickly became dubbed "Freedom Caps" by our Black brothers and sisters. We were welcomed with much joy wherever we went and we had the opportunity to speak to packed Black churches filled seemingly every night with those who came to gain courage to face the troubles of that time. The experience of speaking before a Black church is rather unique; unlike our own congregations, Black people speak back when you preach at them. One always gets encouragement in many different forms—"right on," "hallelujah," "tell us more"—all of the beautiful words of encouragement that the preacher receives from his congregation that I've often yearned for ever since. And we listened to the young preachers, too, young people like our USYers, no more than 15, admonitioning their peers to persevere in the non-violent struggle. One of them suggested to his hearers to be like David, ready to strike down Goliath who clearly was Bull Conner in biblical guise, hardly aware that his model was a relatively violent one for a non-violent preacher.

Even more, the images that they used were moving and, for us at least, deeply emotional. For them, making their way through the streams of water coming from fire hoses was nothing else than crossing the Red Sea and the hymns and the songs and the admonitions all were oriented to what happens to us every single day of our lives when we remind ourselves daily of the redemptive moment of the splitting of the Red Sea. The memory that has stayed with me over the years was not so much the meeting with Dr. King, although that was memorable, but rather the meeting with Dr. King's father, of blessed memory. What the Reverend King, Sr. wanted to know was a simple thing—removed, far removed from the great ideals of those days. He wanted to know, very simply, where we would eat. After all, Jewish rabbis, as he put it, observe the dietary laws and they could not get too much to eat at the motel. I remember sitting at the table with him and my colleagues as he offered to find for us safe passage, through the lines that encircled us, out to the Jewish community where we might find a kosher meal. And I remember our response, "Clearly, Dr. King," we said, "we have come to be with you, to be a part of your struggle; we will forgo our eating in a kosher establishment and instead eat only vegetables and eggs and salads, for our place is with you." The symbolism was not lost, for in that embattled city of Birmingham I felt, I believe, far more comfortable than in many far safer places my travels have taken me ever since.

There is a postscript to the story, or rather two postscripts to the story. One is that in my incredible naivete I believed within my own youthful soul that when I arrived back in my home city of Philadelphia, not by the way having told the president of my congregation I was going (I guess for fear of what he might say), I rather expected marching bands to welcome me. Obviously, nothing of the sort ever occurred. Instead, again out of a moment of youthful enthusiasm and the deepest conviction that I was doing God's work, I assembled all of the children of my Hebrew School to teach them in my own very monotonic voice the theme song of those days, namely, "We Shall Overcome," which they did sing with great enthusiasm. It did not take a half hour after the children were dismissed and went home that I received a call from an officer of my congregation summoning me to an emergency meeting of the Executive Council of the congregation to explain myself and why, of all songs in the Hebrew repertory, I had to teach that particular song. Moreover, such admonitions were exceedingly mild in comparison to some of the problems experienced by some of our men, particularly those who returned to Southern congregations at the time, and, oh yes, the second postscript—two or three days after we left, the motel in which we were sleeping was blown up.

These times are very different. The South is very different. The issues of soda fountains and the serving of Blacks in the department stores of Birmingham, which was one of the things that we had come to talk about with the Jewish entrepreneurs of Birmingham, have long since been radically altered. Integration exists in many quarters of the South, and yet, as we all know, there are still many, many problems. The world of our time is radically different from the one we faced then. Strange, I noted the other day in an article on "Selma 20 Years Later" in *The New York Times* that it is not just the Jews and white Christians who have tended to forget those days; Black young people seem to have forgotten them also, and in the spirit of the retelling of the Passover Haggadah, the Black leadership group struggles to find the way to remind them. Moreover, it must also be said that other things have changed as well. The easy alliance of all of us with the SCLC as well as with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, long ago was dissolved. As I am sure you all know, issues of Black power, the position of Blacks on issues that are at the center of Jewish concern, recognition or non-recognition of the PLO, and a host of other issues have over the course of these past years moved us further and further away from one another.

To this day the Jewish community is still divided over what hap-

pened with Mr. Young at the United Nations, and still has many questions that have not ever in truth been answered for them. Even more, the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. spoken at Rabbinical Assembly Conventions as well as many other places, words that spoke of Black and white together, words that evoked a commonality of concern and compassion, were superseded by other words, words that to the Jewish ear were somewhat harsh. They were words that spoke of Black power, words that in some quarters were denigrating of Jews, of the city of New York in which so many of us live, of what we are and what we hope to be. Our time, one in which the young of that generation have become increasingly older, is a time in which the great idealisms of those days have begun to fade, to be replaced by a cynicism and a preoccupation with the words and symbols of power on all sides that keep human beings away from the recognition of their own spirituality. And yet, despite it all, it seems to me in our coming together on this night and in some of the things that Mr. Young has said in recent months there is some room for hope, I believe, for reconstitution of that common spiritual vision that we had then. With all the changes that have occurred over the course of these past years, thoughtful Jews are fully aware of the fact that Black America still experiences the whiplash of racism, only in a very different way than it did then. Still, to this day, our society is an unequal one with unemployment, lack of opportunity and a residual racism still deep ongoing problems.

While much of the task of achieving legal equality was accomplished long ago, it has not been followed, even more in the North than in the South, with a sense of shared values and shared concerns. Often indeed the Black community and the Jewish community see themselves on opposite sides of many issues. The society that is the inheritor of Martin Luther King's magnificent legacy is still a society in which Black and white have not found an effective way to live together in the streets of our cities and indeed in the factories and trade unions of our land.

At the same time, in the years since then Jews have become legitimately preoccupied with many of the major issues that still overwhelm them. One of the things that did not happen to me in Birmingham (much as I tried at times for it to take place), was that I never did get thrown into jail. Nonetheless, I did manage to get myself arrested only this past week in front of the Soviet Consulate in New York City together with 100 other rabbis present in a demonstration of civil resistance as an expression of protest against the inhumanity of Soviet authorities directed against our fellow Jews. It is fascinating that, as I looked around, there were a good many who were around

in the old days of civil rights concern. And, yes, there were a couple of Black friends, with Mr. Innis of CORE, from the civil rights movement who had come to be with us as well. In these intervening years we have been preoccupied and remain preoccupied with the status of our brothers and sisters in the land of Israel. There have been times in which, just as our Black friends, we have had the feeling of being unheard, unlistened to; our cry for support in time of terrible difficulty has gone unanswered.

In the beginning of this year, during the time of the Festival of Sukkot, we gathered in Independence Square in the city of Philadelphia and we had with us the Mayor of the City of Philadelphia, and also Mr. Bayard Rustin, the very distinguished Black civil rights leader. I presented to Mr. Rustin at that time, on behalf of the Assembly, a *shofar* expressing to him the notion that we recognize that his cry, the cry of the Black people that he gave expression to, was indeed for us the cry of the *shofar* (the call of the *shofar* that sounded, by the way, before the Russian Consulate the other day), the sound of the *shofar* calling us to live with our fellow human beings in justice and with mercy, calling us to a life of redemption. I believe that tonight that call goes out again, a call that comes with equal sincerity and equal commitment and conviction from Black and white, from the Black community with its heritage of persecution and hatred, and from our community, from the Jewish community with our heritage as well against uncaring on the part of the rest of the world while brothers and sisters perished.

It is a call in which the two must join not only to bear witness at both the Soviet and South African Embassies. It is a call that goes out to all of the congregations of this land in which our rabbis serve, a call to them to find ways in which in our time we may reach out to our Black brothers and sisters and they to us. They must hear once more after the decades of separation, the isolation and the loneliness that we so often feel. And we must hear of the racism that still exists among us and the cry for help from the jobless, the uncared for within their community as well. There must be a new recognition of the shared heritage, the great Black hymns that speak of the river Jordan and the land that we love. We must call to mind the great dream that continues to inspire us and fill our lives with meaning, the dream of Black and white together, of men and women together, able to hear each other's difference of view, difference of understanding, and yet affirming a common heritage with compassion, love and determination to create the kind of world in which justice will indeed well up as a mighty stream. It is that world to which both Dr. King and Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel called us. One can never forget their locked

arms as they walked together in Selma, accompanied by members of our Assembly as well. We can never forget the Jewish boys who died in Mississippi in sanctification of God's name.

We must resolve above all to remain together, to be inspired by each other. We must seek to speak honestly and openly with one another over what divides us, what separates us as well as what unites us. We must take each other seriously, must hear the spiritual yearnings of each of our separate communities. We must hear each other's interpretation of the world in which we live but more important than all of that we must resolve together to continue the work of Dr. King and Dr. Heschel. It is not our responsibility perhaps to complete the work of redemption, as the Ethics of the Fathers tells us. It is perhaps not in our time that ultimate redemption will come, but we must continue to seek it, to reach for it, to inspire each other to work for it—for that day when the people of Israel throughout the world will rise and be free, when the Jews of the Soviet Union will be free at last to rejoin their brothers and sisters, when the land of Israel will at long last be allowed to live in peace with those who surround it, when at long last the terrible spectre of anti-Semitism and racism will be wiped off the face of the earth. To that end, Mr. Young, we consecrate all of our energies, all of our hopes, all of our yearnings on this night as together with you we seek to fulfill God's word in this world.

May He who created all of us bless the work of our hands and may it be His will that the great redemptive dream that we share become the reality of our world.

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