

“The Challenge of the Selma Photograph”

by Susannah Heschel, PhD



“I felt my legs were praying.” With those words describing his experience of the Selma march of 1965, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary, transformed a political march into a moment of profound religiosity. Heschel had long been close to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., after meeting him in January 1963 at a conference on Religion and Race. At that meeting, Heschel delivered the sharpest repudiation of racism ever formulated by a Jewish thinker. He and King frequently spoke together to groups of Jews and Christians, emphasizing their shared concern and offering the country a vision of unity between African Americans and Jewish Americans. Their friendship became a symbol that has long been invoked, sometimes with nostalgia, other times with hope for reconciliation, and the photograph of the front row of marchers crossing the Pettus bridge out of Selma, of King and Heschel at an anti-Vietnam war prayer vigil at Arlington National Cemetery, and of Heschel presenting King with an award, are images that continue to inspire pride and hope in Jews. Such images seem to affirm that Jews and Blacks stand together. For some Jews, however, the friendship between Heschel and King is a sign of an unrequited relationship: while Jews supported the Civil Rights movement, African Americans have not supported Jewish concerns, especially the State of Israel. Other Jews rejected Jewish engagement altogether: the writer Hillel Halkin, in a 1976 book, argued that Jews should work for Jewish concerns, not for those of African Americans – utterly ignoring that some Jews are African American.

The rise of neo-conservatism in the 1980s split the Jewish world between those who view social justice as central to Judaism, and those who see Jewish ethnicity and Israel as most important.

Heschel was hardly the only Jew or rabbi to participate in the Selma march. On the contrary, Jews flocked to the South to participate as Freedom Riders and in efforts to register Black voters. Indeed, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were two Jews murdered by the KKK along with James Cheney in Philadelphia, Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964. Dozens of rabbis, from Reform to Orthodox, went to march in Selma, and many raised funds to support the SCLC.

On the other hand, the Selma photograph also shows the other side. In the background is a large billboard advertising Tepper's, a department store owned by Sol Tepper, a member of Selma's Jewish community and an outspoken proponent of segregation. A member of the White Citizens Council and a friend of the notorious Sheriff Jim Clark, Tepper's active opposition to the Civil Rights movement was shared by nearly all members of Selma's small Jewish community.

Yet another element expressed by the Selma photograph is celebration. The marchers are smiling because President Johnson and the US Congress were finally on the verge of passing a Voting Rights Act. A previous attempt to march from Selma two weeks earlier, on March 7, 1965, ended in disaster when the Alabama state troopers charged the marchers, attacking them with wooden clubs and tear gas; that day came to be known as "Bloody Sunday." The troopers' violence was filmed and shown on television throughout the United States that evening, and people were appalled. Governor George Wallace of Alabama refused to protect civil rights workers or meet with them. President Johnson, who viewed King as an ally, intervened and sent federal troops to protect the marchers. On March 15, Johnson convened a joint session of Congress to press for passage of the Voting Rights Act, concluding his speech, shown on national television, by dramatically declaring, "we shall overcome." Thus, the march from Selma to Montgomery ultimately took place starting on March 21, 1965, with the air of celebrating an achievement.

Still, we might also question the long-term accomplishment of that march. The Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress and became law in August 1965, but in recent years state legislatures, especially in Southern states, have successfully curbed voting rights for many Americans, particularly African Americans. Voter ID laws and laws permanently prohibiting ex-felons from voting have disenfranchised large numbers of voters in numerous parts of the country. The requirement that the US State Department's Civil Rights division monitor voting laws was struck down by the US Supreme Court, with Chief Justice Roberts writing for the majority.

Does the Selma march of 1965 continue to mark a moment of celebration? Jews have long been proud of Jewish support for Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement. Groups of Jews from around the US make pilgrimages to Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma to view memorials and museums related to the movement, and the photograph of the Selma march

serves as a point of pride and inspiration for further Jewish social activism. On the other hand, numerous commentators have argued that relations between Blacks and Jews deteriorated starting in the late 1960s after the death of Dr. King. Moreover, while the vast majority of American Jews vote for Democrats, Jewish financial support has also turned to right-wing Republicans. Some Jews charge that a “Black antisemitism” exists, although few have investigated the extent of racism in the Jewish world. From that perspective, the photograph might be viewed not a celebration, but a moment lost in a relationship that no longer thrives.

As the daughter of Rabbi Heschel, I have long felt that the photograph of the Selma march should not signal celebration but challenge: are we as Jews addressing racism, asks the photograph. Are we actively forging alliances with the African American community? When will African American and Asian American Jews feel fully at home in Jewish institutions? Can we put aside our pride in the efforts of Jewish civil rights workers of the 1960s and recognize how much work is left for us to do?

Let us take responsibility for the entire Selma photograph: for the warm smiles on the faces of the front row of marchers wearing leis and full of optimism for the future, but also remembering the horrific violence, physical and verbal, that surrounded the marchers. The photograph can bring inspiration only when we understand it as a challenge. We need to remember that we have both Teppers and Heschels in our Jewish community. The right to feel pride in that photograph must be earned through our ongoing hard work.