



Middle East Spotlight

Communities of Conscience

In 1976, as our country celebrated its bicentennial, the United States government officially recognized Black History Month, commemorated each February. Though the history of the African American community cannot be summed up in just four weeks, this month reminds us of the stories of courage and leadership that mark the importance of African American history.

As American Jews, Black History Month is also a time when we can take pride in the strong bonds between the Jewish and African American communities. Jews marched alongside civil rights leaders in the 1960s and continue to work together with the African American community in all arenas—including strengthening American support for Israel.

During the peak of the Civil Rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke fervently of his support for a Jewish state in the land of Israel. Perhaps most famously, in a 1968 speech to the Rabbinical Assembly Dr. King stated: “peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all our might to protect its right to exist, its territorial integrity. 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.”

Dr. King’s vision and bravery was met by his friend Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, an influential civil rights leader and prominent rabbi. He famously walked arm in arm with Dr. King in Selma, Alabama during a pivotal civil rights march. Rabbi Heschel’s position in the front row of marchers was a symbol of religious Jewish commitment to civil rights that helped to stir Jews of all levels of observance and social status.

Today, supporting Israel continues to be a value that binds the Jewish and African American communities, especially on college campuses. Each year, through the dozens of pro-Israel groups on the campuses of America’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities, African American students learn about the ties that bind the Jewish and African American populations.

Those ties lead to support that has a real impact. For example, 135 campus leaders from 66 different Historically Black Colleges and Universities recently signed a leadership statement supporting diplomatic efforts to end Iran’s nuclear weapons program, and “the vigorous effort of Democratic and Republican Congressional leaders to pass new Iran sanctions legislation now giving the President additional tools that can be utilized if diplomacy fails.”

We honor the legacy of leaders like Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel, people who paved the way for the African American and Jewish leaders of today. Like them, we must find not only the courage to stand up for what we believe in, but also the determination to stand together.