

The March on Washington—Reflections of Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch

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It was my privilege to be one of the organizers of the March on Washington. Only two Jewish organizations were officially recognized as sponsors of the March: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (today the Union for Reform Judaism) and the American Jewish Congress. In those days I served as the Founding Director of the Union's Religious Action Center in Washington. Our institution served as the organizing hub for all Jews who wanted to participate. We mobilized the volunteers. We arranged for signs in Hebrew and English to be carried by the marchers. We convened preparatory meetings, including a meeting the morning of the March of the representatives of the leading civil rights organizations. The umbrella coordinating body of all the civil rights groups was the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. We had invited the Leadership Conference to house its offices in our Religious Action Center. Our Conference room became the venue where all the deliberations were held on the complex controversial issues regarding the civil rights legislation of the 1960's.

It is important to recall that the very concept of a March on Washington was viewed by many organizations and individual leaders with hesitation, and by a few with trepidation. Even some of the most ardent supporters of civil rights legislation feared that the March would lead to violence and would therefore be counter-productive. However, from the very moment the proposal was initiated, our movement rendered overwhelming support.

In retrospect, the March was indeed far more impactful than the initiators had projected. It served as the setting for Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" address, now considered among the most consequential orations in the American legacy. There were other great speeches, including the address of Rabbi Yoachim Prinz, then serving as president of the American Jewish Congress. Prinz, a refugee from Germany, stressed that the greatest sin of the German masses under the Nazis was the sin of silence, when confronted by the evils of discrimination, persecution and social injustice. The very air of that humid summer day in August 1963 was filled with exhilaration as the chorus of 250,000 raised their voice in unison to sing the hymn of the civil rights revolution:

We shall overcome!

However, as pleased as I am to experience the retrospective acclaim the 50th anniversary has been receiving, I must enter a caveat. I disagree with those who contend that the March was the major influence in the promulgation of the civil rights legislation of the 1960's. Marches and demonstrations may be influential, and even essential, but the legislative process requires long term, persistent, dedicated educational and lobbying efforts by critical masses of the public. And these efforts in turn must motivate committed political leadership.

The civil rights legislation of the 1960's serves as evidence. With only the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr, and his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, it is doubtful if any legislation would have been adopted. It was essential

to mobilize a host of organizations—the religious groups, the labor movements, the civil liberties groups, the women’s organizations and the entire panoply of the disparate civil rights groups—to generate public opinion and to engage in political lobbying. Of special import was the expert legal counsel of the NAACP and the social, demographic studies of the National Urban League. The public media highlighted the horrendous incidents in Selma, Alabama, the murder of the little girls at the Birmingham church, and the ongoing acts of racial violence and discrimination. Last but not least, special credit must be given to President Lyndon Johnson, himself a Southerner, who comprehended the profound moral ramifications for a democratic America of passing and implementing the civil rights legislation. He effectively exploited the bully pulpit of the presidency to win over recalcitrant senators and congressmen.

So where is American society today, 50 years after the March on Washington?

We have come a long way, a very long way. The gaping disparities between blacks and whites have been narrowed from every perspective—poverty, employment, living standards, educational opportunity and achievement, numbers of elected public officials, integration of all public facilities, topped off by the election twice of the first African American president.

What is the lesson we should have learned? The lesson was originally taught to the human family by the Jewish people during the Exodus from Egypt. It is a lesson which permeated the spirit and life experience of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was transformed into a Moses-like leader for American democracy.

The most formative declaration in the Haggadah read at the Passover meal is: “in every generation every person must look upon oneself as if he or she had come forth from Egyptian slavery.” So long as there is one person in the world who is deprived of fundamental human rights, none of us is truly free. Wherever and whenever humans struggle to free themselves from the yoke of bondage, the drama of the redemption is reenacted.

The lesson of Jewish tradition is that the Jewish people as an entity were freed. The Jewish people as a whole received the Torah at Mt. Sinai. That is the lesson we should have learned from the on-going civil rights revolution. The civil rights movement does not belong to African Americans alone. It belongs to all who make it their cause. We do not engage in social action to help others, but rather to help ourselves, to fulfill the dictates of Jewish ethics and to live the lessons of our history. Constructive change in the direction of social justice in America requires a mass effort, a continuing non-stop mobilization of a broad coalition of forces, both groups and individuals. This is the prerequisite to Tikkun Olam—“perfecting the world under the kingdom of God.”

Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch served as the Founding Director of the Religious Action Center from 1962-1973. Today he is the Honorary Life President of the [World Union for Progressive Judaism](#), headquartered in Jerusalem, Israel