

Martin Luther King Day

Introduction

We all know Martin Luther King Jr was a great civil rights leader. We celebrate his birthday in January because he actually changed the world. We know him as a historical figure. How is this connected to the Refusenik movement? In this lesson, students will consider the connections between the civil rights movement, Jewish values, and the struggle for Soviet Jewry.

Objectives

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to make connections between the civil rights movement, Jewish values, and the struggle for Soviet Jewry.

Big Ideas	Jews are responsible for one another (solidarity).
	You can make a difference.
Content	To explain the Jewish values that led Jewish people to fight for Soviet Jewish rights.
	To relate the historical events that led to freedom for Soviet Jews.
Skills	To build a civic engagement plan.
	To contribute to causes relating to (Jewish/all) human freedom.
Meaning	To reflect on your obligation to help (Jewish/all) people in need.
	To reflect on the power of a common (Jewish) voice.

Duration: 1 class

Materials: Text Study and website links, included



Procedure

1. Trigger

- a) Begin by using the photograph to trigger discussion about activism, injustice and fighting for the rights of others. Use these topics of conversation as a lead-in to looking critically at the Jewish texts and our responsibilities toward others.



Martin Luther King Jr., left, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, right, during Selma march in 1965. Courtesy of Susannah Heschel

- b) **Ask the students:** Did you know that one half to two-thirds of all whites in the civil rights movement were Jews? Leaders of mainstream Jewish organizations (i.e. American Jewish Committee, B'nai B'rith, the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Conservative movement's Synagogue Council of America) rallied against segregation and Jim Crow laws.



2. **Text Study:** Look at the following texts in order to help provide context to the “Brainstorming” questions.

Shemot 22:20

20 You shall not aggrieve a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

וגר לא-תונה ולא תלחצנו כִּי-גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Healing the Heart of Darkness"

Those who forget what it feels like to be a stranger, eventually come to oppress strangers, and if the children of Abraham oppress strangers, why did I make them My covenantal partners? Empathy, sympathy, knowledge and rationality are usually enough to let us live at peace with others. But not in hard times. Serbs, Croats and Muslims lived peaceably together in Bosnia for years. So did Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. The problem arises at times of change and disruption when people are anxious and afraid. That is why exceptional defenses are necessary, which is why the Torah speaks of memory and history - things that go to the very heart of our identity. We have to remember that we were once on the other side of the equation. We were once strangers: the oppressed, the victims. Remembering the Jewish past forces us to undergo role reversal. In the midst of freedom we have to remind ourselves of what it feels like to be a slave.



3. Guided Discussion

- What are some of the common themes between the civil rights movement and Jewish values?
- What are some of the common themes between the civil rights movement and the struggle for Soviet Jews?
- Do you think that there is a danger in today's society of becoming an oppressor because you do not know what it is like to be a stranger, as Rabbi Sacks suggests? If so, what society or sector of society is at risk?
- What was Martin Luther King trying to express in his speech addressing Soviet Jews?
- How is this plight similar or different to that of the experience of African Americans at the time?

4. Share with your Students:

There is a speech Dr. King wrote on behalf of Soviet Jews. In December 1966, on Hanukkah, the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry was having a nation-wide organizing conference call, and invited Dr. King to speak over the phone, an offer he gladly accepted. What followed was a rousing address on behalf of what he called a “withered and restricted Jewish community.”

“Individual Jews,” Dr. King said in his comments, “may in the main be physically and economically secure in Russia, but the absence of opportunity to associate as Jews in the enjoyment of Jewish culture and religious experience becomes a severe limitation upon an individual.”

You can read the address and the history of how it came together [here](#), and you can see King's original hand-written notes [here](#).

- <https://www.jta.org/1987/01/08/archive/focus-on-issues-martin-luther-king-and-soviet-jews>
- <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/speech-mlk-about-jews-living-soviet-union#>

5. Conclude

Explain to your students that African Americans slaves in plantations often sang spirituals as they worked in the fields. The songs gave them hope and helped to pass the time during grueling work. Many of these songs are connected to the Israelites' slavery and then exit from Egypt. Although most slaves were Christians at this point, this Bible story held great meaning for them.

The connection between the Jewish community and the African American community was recently celebrated by two singing groups, The Maccabeats and Naturally 7 - Shed a Little Light - MLK Jr. Day - (James Taylor Cover) . Play this clip for your students.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crKDDS5D_os

James Taylor, himself, posted on social media:



3.6M Views · about 2 years ago · CC

"One of the best covers of 'Shed a Little Light' that I've heard." ~ James Taylor 1/14/16

In honor and celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr, we hope you enjoy this version by The Maccabeats and Naturally 7 as much as James did. #MLKDay

(Video: Uri Westrich)

5. Ideas for Extension

- Were there others (besides Jewish communities throughout the world) who came to the aid of Soviet Jews? What were the guiding principles or values that led them to do so?
- Can you think of other historical examples (or even a current example) where people from a different country, religion or belief system came to the aid of others?