The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism: Celebrating 50 Years in Pursuit of Social Justice!



Text Study: Civil Rights and the Jewish Tradition

The Jewish community has been among the quintessential victims of group hatred—enslaved in Egypt, banished from countless nations and communities, locked in ghettos, subjected to ongoing persecution, discrimination, harassment, pogroms, Crusades, and above all-- the Holocaust. The texts below consider how the Jewish community's experience of bondage, slavery and persecution informs its involvement in social justice movements in general and the Civil Rights Movement in particular. This text study also explores how the lessons of Jewish history and, most particularly, the story of the Exodus, inspired others to seek freedom and their own version of the Promised Land.

Read and discuss the following passages:

You shall have one standard for the stranger and the citizen alike: for I, the Eternal, am your God. (Leviticus 24:22)

For the citizen among the Israelites and for the resident who resides among them—you shall have one ritual for anyone who acts in error. (Numbers 15:29)

Our masters taught: for the sake of peace, non-Jewish poor should be supported as we support the poor of Israel, the non-Jewish sick should be visited as we visit the sick of Israel, and the non-Jewish dead should be buried as we bury the dead of Israel. (*Gittin* 59a-61a)

- What does it mean to be a "stranger"? What do these texts teach us about how we as a society should treat those who are considered strangers?
- The quote from Gittin implies that when disparities exist in a community, whether in rights, privileges or social benefits, peace is not possible. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- How do these passages relate to the Jewish community's involvement in the struggle for equality during the Civil Rights Movement?
- Despite the advances made during the Civil Rights Movement, in what ways do we, as individuals and as a society, still treat the black community as strangers?
- Who else in our society do we currently treat as strangers?

Read and discuss the following passages:

I the Eternal am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage (Exodus 20:2)

"Now, what does this mean in the great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity." (Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.)

- How has the Jewish community's collective history influenced our involvement in issues of social justice?
- How can the teachings of Exodus provide inspiration and motivation to those who seek to free themselves from modern-day bondage?
- When Dr. King declares, "let us maintain unity," who is the "us" that he is referring to?
- Is unity important for the advancement of social justice? If so, why?

Read and discuss the following rabbinic commentaries:

"From the standpoint of the Torah there can be no distinction between one human being and another on the basis of race or color. Any discrimination shown to another human being on account of the color of his or her skin constitutes loathsome barbarity." (Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik)

"Discrimination of any kind is doubly damning—it damns the man who discriminates and it damns the man discriminated against. No man can proclaim himself a superior and set out to prove his superiority by degrading a so-called inferior, without making himself a victim of the very degradation he seeks to impose upon another." (Rabbi Stephen S. Wise)

"Racial or religious bigotry must be recognized for what it is: blasphemy. The problem is not only how to do justice to the Colored people; it is also how to stop the profanation of God's name by dishonoring the Negro's name." (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel)

- Why does discrimination damn both "the man who discriminates" and "the man discriminated against"? What are the moral implications of discrimination?
- How do these teachings, which warn against discrimination of one individual by another, reflect the Jewish community's broader goals of eliminating all forms of discrimination, including legally sanctioned discrimination?
- Our physical, religious, cultural and other differences shape us in many ways. They contribute greatly to the way we see and interact with the world. How do we avoid using those differences as the basis for division?

Concluding Conversation:

Read and discuss the following passage from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s address at the Union for Reform Judaism's 47th Biennial Banquet on November 20, 1963:

"I would also like to take just a minute to express my personal appreciation publicly to those of you who have supported us in such a magnificent and consistent way in the struggle for civil rights. Many of you have prayed for us when we needed your prayers most. Many of you have gone down in your pockets and given generous financial contributions to the civil rights organizations, realizing that we have tremendous financial burdens and that we could not carry on in this struggle without this kind of financial support. Then some of you have been



willing to make a personal witness by actually joining in demonstrations. Some of your rabbis have left their secure congregations to come down to places like Albany, Georgia; Tallahassee, Florida; Jackson, Mississippi; and Birmingham, Alabama to make a personal witness. All of these things have given us renewed courage and vigor to carry on the struggle. And I can assure you that we will remember this support and these marvelous expressions as long as the cords of memory shall lengthen."

- According to Dr. King, what were the ways that the Jewish community contributed to the Civil Rights Movement? Do these surprise you?
- Are these the same ways that the Jewish community contributes to contemporary social and political movements? How else do we contribute?

(You might want to refer to the resource sheet "<u>The Jewish Role in the Civil Rights Struggle</u>" to contextualize the remarks by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

The modern-day civil rights battle is the struggle for equality for the LGBT community. To extend this text study to discuss this issue, see our "<u>Text Study Extension: LGBT Rights – The New Frontier of Civil Rights.</u>"

Check out the work of the Religious Action Center on civil rights and many other important legislative issues at www.rac.org!

