

“In a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel 60 years ago

Almost 57 years ago, (June 16, 1963) Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel sent the following telegram to President John F. Kennedy in response to an invitation from JFK to attend a meeting of religious leaders at the White House to discuss the then growing racial tensions in the country:

I look forward to privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow. Likelihood exists that Negro problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it. Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church synagogue have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month's salary toward fund for Negro housing and education. I propose that you Mr. **President declare state of moral emergency.** A Marshall plan for aid to Negroes is becoming a necessity. The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.

Dr. King was once asked about endangering the lives of “innocent bystanders” when he led a march that he knew would encounter violence, as in Selma. His answer was quite simple and direct: “the term is an oxymoron, for if you are a bystander, you cannot be innocent.”

“There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

“One hundred (and fifty+) years ago the emancipation was proclaimed. It is time for the white man to strive for self-emancipation, to set himself free of bigotry, to stop being a slave to wholesale contempt, a passive recipient of slander.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

“That equality is a good thing, a fine goal, may be generally accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of inequality.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

“He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.” Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. continued: “History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

On April 9, 1968, two civil rights workers in their early 20's marched through the streets of Atlanta behind the coffin of Dr. Martin Luther King, jr. Earlier that morning we had been assigned to bring one of the mules for the mule-train that carried Dr. King's body from the Ebenezer Baptist Church to Morehouse College and to his first burial site. We walked beside our teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and then Presidential hopeful, Robert F. Kennedy. Stunned by King's assassination and terrified of what it would mean for the future, I asked: "Rabbi Heschel, what are we to do now?" He kept walking and turned back and said simply: "You must teach the children, you must teach them a Judaism that can remake the world."

Abraham Lincoln's immortal words "that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."