

## KI SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE REPORT BY DR. ARLENE B. HOLTZ



### A Decalogue of Decency

Most of us are familiar with the large photo in our lobby of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching together in Selma, but many of us might be hard pressed to identify the other rabbi in that photo. He is Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath, who was head of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations UAHC, which became the Union for Reform Judaism), from 1943 until his death in 1973. During that time he was a fiery champion for social justice and a driving force for the creation of the Religious Action Center which was approved at the UAHC Biennial in 1959.

During his tenure Rabbi Eisendrath spoke for and against the burning social issues of his day including the Civil Right Movement which he was for, and the War in Vietnam which he was against. His stance on these issues brought him into conflict with members of our movement, and although he was famously pictured marching with Dr. King, he was forced to withdraw an invitation for Dr. King to speak at the UHAC's General Assembly meeting in Miami in 1959 "as the result of strong internal opposition."<sup>1</sup>

For Passover 1965 Rabbi Eisendrath wrote A Decalogue of Decency, "for the relationship between man and his brother..."<sup>2</sup> Although the language is dated, the clarion call for social justice and decency is particularly pertinent for us today. I think it's important for us to see the foot-steps of those who walked before us in order to realize that Reform Jews have engaged in social justice work for a long time, that we have had leaders with courage who spoke out on matters of racial justice even in the face of internal opposition, and that as we engage in the difficult issues of today the words of past leaders can inspire us and help us to reflect on what our great tradition of Jewish thought propels us to do as we face our own challenges.

In that spirit here is Rabbi Eisendrath's Decalogue of Decency:

The Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after their exodus from Egypt which we celebrate each Passover, received from Moses the Decalogue handed down to him at Mt. Sinai and which has served through the centuries as a guide to conduct.

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<sup>1</sup> Schulman, A.M. (1993). *Like a Raging Fire: A Biography of Maurice N. Eisendrath*, New York, NY; UAHC Press.

<sup>2</sup> Wisch, J. A. Texas Jewish Post (Fort Worth, Tex.), Vol. 19, No. 15, Ed. 1 Thursday, April 15, 1965, newspaper, April 15, 1965; Fort Worth, Texas.

(<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph753825/>: accessed June 22, 2020)

What we require today for our age more desperately than ought else besides is in my judgment a Decalogue of Decency for the relationship between man and his brother man, patterned on the ancient Ten Commandments and which might read something like this:

**1. I AM THE LORD THY GOD** – who brought not alone the Hebrews out of Egypt but the Ethiopians from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir, which means quite simply, as both Moses and Amos would have understood it, that I am the Lord of those Americans who believe today that He is their sole possession but I am the Lord likewise of those hundreds of thousands, even hundreds of millions of humble children of the Divine, behind even the Iron and the Bamboo Curtains. I am the Lord not only of the proud and the supercilious whites but I am the Lord also of the colored. I am the Lord who cannot be confined into any structure of stone be it cathedral of church or synagogue, but I am the Lord of the Heavens and of the earth, one and indivisible.

**2. THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BESIDE ME** –neither of status nor of success before which men so grovelingly bow down today, nor of Mammon nor of Mars, both of which claim man’s seemingly undeviating allegiance in our time.

**3. THAT SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN** – by stamping “in God We Trust” upon your coins and postage stamps and trusting almost exclusively not in Him but in your proud accoutrements of war

**4. REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY, TO KEEP IT HOLY** –in order that through decent leisure men may feel again their dignity as children of the Divine, that they may no longer feel as increasing numbers are coming to believe themselves today, to be mere machines and tools, motes of dust on a vast conveyor belt, slots in an IBM calculator.

**5. HONOR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER**—that thou might safeguard the security and the decency of the home, that there might be peace again between the generations.

**6. THOU SHALT NOT MURDER** –either the one or the many, either singly or in the mass, either thy contemporaries impending incineration of the generations still unborn by polluting the atmosphere with the noxious, noisome, nauseating poisons of nuclear fall-out.

**7. THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY** – not merely in person but as a society, by adulterating the ether-waves, by the cheapening tawdriness that makes the whole of life seem to the younger generation cheap and leads them into the dens of juvenile delinquency.

**8 THOU SHALT NOT STEAL**—by stealing a man’s birthright, by making it impossible for him either because of color or creed or station in life to pursue his education or his

employment or to live where he chooses rather than in the imposed ghettos of our vigilantly guarded neighborhoods of the North as well as the South.

**9. THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS**—by misleading innuendos and rumors and gossip against thy neighbor’s faith, precluding every opportunity for advancement even to the highest places in our land to a man because supposedly he pursues some other faith.

**10. THOU SHALT NOT COVET** – not only thy next-door neighbor’s house, nor his ox, nor his ass, but thou shalt not covet the distant nation’s missiles to the moon, but covet instead thine own divinely decreed mission unto mankind.

This is the Decalogue of decency which I would have our time, our nation, our people pursue, so that we might in truth usher in God’s Kingdom in our time.