

What role did jews play in the american civil rights movement

[Religion](#)



589352 In the 1960s when civil rights marches were a common occurrence, many people from northern states went to the south to participate in these events. Many of those northern civil rights marchers were Jews. Perhaps Jewish people felt some affinity and/or sympathy with African-Americans whose ancestors had once been slaves like their own ancestors in Egypt. Perhaps it had to do with the horrific oppression of the Holocaust in Europe so fresh in the memories of all Jews. American Jews did not like the blatant and systemized subjugation of one cultural group to another, and helped African Americans in their struggle for civil rights long before the 1960s. But in the 1960s, with the world watching on the evening news, many Jews traveled from northern cities to southern sites of marches, sit-ins, and rallies to support equal rights for African-Americans and to oppose those who would oppress them.

Clearly there were motivating factors that made it beneficial for African Americans to have Jewish people helping them to attain equal rights. Any group who chose to support the civil rights movement would not only lend encouragement and backing, but also credibility and strength in numbers. Stephen J. Whitfield confirms that African Americans and Jews “ have been so entangled that some twentieth-century Jews in the United States would imagine themselves black, and would blur the lines of race and ethnicity that bigotry had hoped to keep distinct” (Whitfield, 2008 , p. 353). However, it was not just an affinity or moral outrage that prompted Jewish people to become involved in the civil rights movement. Any victory for African Americans was a victory for Jews too.

As a people, Jews have met with oppression throughout their history. Many

felt as if they dwelt in a place somewhere between the dominant ethnicity of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant and the most oppressed race in the United States, African American—sort of a gray area between black and white. By helping to obtain civil rights for African Americans, Jews knew that their cause would be swept along in the tide of change. They too would benefit from changes in federal legislation that would rein in some of the blatant injustice. Martin Luther King understood this. During the bus boycott in Montgomery, AL he said, “ Our victory will not be a victory for Montgomery’s Negroes alone. It will be a victory for justice, a victory for fair play, and a victory for democracy.’ After the boycott proved successful, King refused to ‘ take this as a victory over the white man, but as a victory for justice and democracy’” (Whitfield, 2008 , p. 355). Yet, it did not hurt the cause of the civil rights protestors to have people join them who looked very much like the oppressors, but who had suffered some of the same types of bigotry. Part of the success of the civil rights campaign can be attributed to the fact that people who were not African American joined the cause and marched alongside African Americans. Susan Jacoby says, “ Most of the young Jews [who] went South were the grandchildren of immigrants. Some had parents who were college graduates, but most represented the first generation in their families to obtain a higher education” (Jacoby, 1979, p. 553). Perhaps these Jews, aware of what had happened in Europe, from which their parents and grandparents had escaped, not even a generation before, thought that if one group could be so openly oppressed without intervention from the government or courts, then who would stop those who felt a similar hatred of Jews? The fact that many of the “ white” marchers could easily “ pass” as

white Anglo-Saxon Protestants helped too. Other, more ambivalent whites saw these “white looking” people marching alongside the African Americans and saw themselves.

Various Jewish organizations supported the marchers both physically and financially. PBS’s website lists some groups who offered not only moral but monetary backing to the civil rights movement. “The American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League were central to the campaign against racial prejudice. Jews made substantial financial contributions to many civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. About 50 percent of the civil rights attorneys in the South during the 1960s were Jews, as were over 50 percent of the Whites who went to Mississippi in 1964 to challenge Jim Crow Laws” (PBS, 2011). Jews saw supporting civil rights for African Americans as a good investment.

Jews played many roles in the civil rights movement besides being moral arbitrators. They were financiers funding a movement that spoke to their conscience and cultural memories. They provided voices that added volume to the demands and bodies to the marches that added numbers. To some politicians, that translated to votes, and that was important. Maybe the most important role that Jews played in the civil rights movement was adding credible support. Not that the African Americans had no credibility, but as oppressed people those ambivalent to their plight could not fathom it. Jews had fresh experience with grievous oppression, oppression that everyone could remember because it was fresh, and no one wanted it repeated.

Works Cited

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