



FOUNDATION
AGAINST
INTOLERANCE
& RACISM

Lesson and Unit Titles: Unit: Black-Jewish Alliances Lesson: Black-Jewish Alliances and Civil Rights

Recommended Grade Levels: 10-12

Recommended Pacing: 90 minutes

FAIR Standards and Objectives: FR.9-12.20

Theme(s): Movements for Freedom and Justice

Era(s): 1900-1968

Areas of Focus: Civil Rights, African American and American Jewish Partnerships

Lesson Objectives: Students will be able to:

- Explain the origins of the NAACP.
- Explain the origins of the ADL.
- Name Jewish immigrants who played key roles in advocating for Black civil rights.
- Analyze why Jewish immigrants felt empathy for African Americans' "double consciousness."
- Describe the relationship between the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Teacher Instructions:

Black-Jewish Alliances During the Civil Rights Movement

The teacher will read the following four paragraphs as students follow along on their computers or on a hand out. After the second paragraph, you will play an NPR recording.

Throughout the evolution of American civil rights, American Jews have served as allies of African Americans. As two groups which had experienced oppression, discrimination, and marginalization, the alliance between American Jews and African Americans was a natural one.

In 1909, Henry Moscowitz, a Jewish immigrant from Romania, joined W.E.B. DuBois¹ and other civil rights leaders to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). White and Black activists, who were concerned about the violence being enacted against African Americans across the United States, founded the NAACP in New York City.

Du Bois had published his groundbreaking work *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, in which he described a phenomenon called "double consciousness." He described the divided identity experienced by African Americans, writing, "One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, who dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

The teacher plays "The Enduring Lyricism of W.E.B. Dubois The Souls of Black Folk" for the class.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/02/23/588103943/the-enduring-lyricism-of-w-e-b-du-bois-the-souls-of-black-folk>

Du Bois's writing resonated with American Jewish immigrants, like Albert Einstein, who was a Jewish immigrant physicist who settled in the United States in 1933 after accepting a position at Princeton University.

In later years, Albert Einstein also joined DuBois and the NAACP to promote civil rights for people of color, and in 1940, gave a speech at the New York World's Fair to open an exhibit that honored America's diversity. In his speech, he describes "Negroes and immigrants" as "stepchildren of the nation," stating, "we are glad and grateful to acknowledge the debt that the community owes them." His speech is below.

¹ <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/civil-rights-leaders/web-du-bois>

Distribute a copy of Albert Einstein's speech. Ask students to read the speech out loud, one student reading a paragraph at a time.

It is a fine and high-minded idea, also in the best sense a proud one, to erect at the World's Fair a wall of fame to immigrants and Negroes of distinction.

The significance of the gesture is this: it says: These, too, belong to us, and we are glad and grateful to acknowledge the debt that the community owes them. And focusing on these particular contributors, Negroes and immigrants, shows that the community feels a special need to show regard and affection for those who are often regarded as step-children of the nation—for why else this combination?

If, then, I am to speak on the occasion, it can only be to say something on behalf of these step-children. As for the immigrants, they are the only ones to whom it can be accounted a merit to be Americans. For they have had to take trouble for their citizenship, whereas it has cost the majority nothing at all to be born in the land of civic freedom.

As for the Negroes, the country has still a heavy debt to discharge for all the troubles and disabilities it has laid on the Negro's shoulders, for all that his fellow-citizens have done and to some extent still are doing to him. To the Negro and his wonderful songs and choirs, we are indebted for the finest contribution in the realm of art which America has so far given to the world. And this great gift we owe, not to those whose names are engraved on this "Wall of Fame," but to the children of the people, blossoming namelessly as the lilies of the field.

In a way, the same is true of the immigrants. They have contributed in their way to the flowering of the community, and their individual striving and suffering have remained unknown.

One more thing I would say with regard to immigration generally: There exists on the subject a fatal miscomprehension. Unemployment is not decreased by restricting immigration. For unemployment depends on faulty distribution of work among those capable of work. Immigration increases consumption as much as it does demand on labor. Immigration strengthens not only the internal economy of a sparsely populated country, but also its defensive power.

The Wall of Fame arose out of a high-minded ideal; it is calculated to stimulate just and magnanimous thoughts and feelings. May it work to that effect.²

Group Work

² <https://www.openculture.com/2017/02/albert-einstein-gives-a-speech-praising-diversity-immigrants-contributions-to-america-1939.html>

Each group will be comprised of 4 people. Each person will have a different responsibility. They will include:

- Facilitator
- Note taker
- Timekeeper
- Researcher

You have 20 minutes to discuss the following questions:

1. What was one possible source of American Jews' empathy for African Americans?
2. What did W.E.B. Dubois mean by "double consciousness"?
3. Why did Albert Einstein refer to African Americans and Jewish immigrants as "stepchildren of the nation"?
4. Why is diversity in a society valuable?
5. Describe the alliance between MLK and Heschel. In what way does this alliance surprise you or not surprise you? Discuss.

Students will create a slide deck and present their work to the class.

Just as the NAACP was formed to address violence and discrimination against African Americans, an organization called the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) was created in the early 1900s to address discrimination against Jews.³ However, the ADL did not limit itself to fighting antisemitism, purporting that to fight prejudice can only succeed if prejudice is fought in all its manifestations.

To lend support to the African American community which was fighting for equal rights in education in the 1950s, the ADL filed an amicus brief -- providing supporting information -- in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court school desegregation case. The ADL also supported anti-mask laws, which prohibited the wearing of masks during public demonstrations, and which resulted in a significant decrease in membership in the Ku Klux Klan. And, the ADL helped to mobilize support for civil rights resulting in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Distribute the four paragraphs below and call on students to read a paragraph out loud.

A Jewish ally in the civil rights movement was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel -- a civil rights activist who was regarded as "a great prophet" by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A spiritual man, Heschel believed that Americans could achieve redemption through their efforts to combat racism. In March 1965, Heschel walked side by side with King in the

³ <https://www.adl.org/who-we-are/history#in-the-1910s>

Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights. Heschel recalled that the march was a spiritual experience for him during which he felt that “his legs were praying.”⁴



During the Civil Rights Movement, Jewish activists like Abraham Joshua Heschel represented a disproportionate number of white people involved in the struggle. In the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964, for example, Jews comprised half of the young people who participated.⁵ American Jews had been mobilized to show their support by Martin Luther King’s letter from the Birmingham Jail, which he had written to American clergy, as well as by the television broadcast of the Selma march

The Black-Jewish alliance during the Civil Rights era was reciprocal. The Reverend Martin Luther King was a staunch ally of the American Jewish community and of Israel. Martin Luther King emphasized the importance of Israel’s existence, stating, “Israel is one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security, and that security must be a reality.”⁶

Play recording for the class

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/martin-luther-king-and-israel>

King was scheduled to lead a pilgrimage to Israel in 1967, but canceled the trip due to the 1967 Six-Day-War between Israel and Jordan, Syria, and Egypt. He wrote to the Israeli airline El Al: “It is with the deepest regret that I cancel my proposed pilgrimage to the Holy Land for this year, but the constant turmoil in the Middle East makes it extremely difficult to conduct a religious pilgrimage free of both political overtones and the fear of danger to the participants.”

⁴ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/heschel-abraham-joshua>

⁵ <https://rac.org/brief-history-jews-and-civil-rights-movement-1960s>

⁶ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/martin-luther-king-and-israel>

King planned to reschedule the pilgrimage for the following year. Seven months later, he was assassinated at a hotel in Tennessee.

Additional Readings:

<https://rac.org/brief-history-jews-and-civil-rights-movement-1960s>

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/heschel-abraham-joshua>