Tzedakah: The Indianapolis Jewish Community and Civil Rights Movement

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When National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Wilson Head was barred entrance from a theater in Indianapolis, IN he did not know that he would begin a series of events that would fundamentally shape his community.[1] In response to the theater's discrimination, the Indianapolis chapter of NAACP filed suit against the theater manager and the owner of its parent company Canton Amusements. At this time Charles Posner, head of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), was able to mediate and resolve the case. Posner's work on behalf of the NAACP forced the theater to integrate. A local paper *The Indianapolis Recorder* wrote on the integration of the Canton Amusements theater in colorful and triumphant language. "Doors. . . this week swung open to patrons without regard to color, as the local branch NAACP scored a major victory in its fight against jimcrow policies." [2] From this moment on, both the NAACP and the JCRC began tandem efforts to pursue common interests in social justice. This is emblematic of the Civil Rights movements all across America in the first half of the 20th century. The success of the Civil Rights movement is due in large part to the intersectional partnerships it forged – namely in the Jewish community. The Jewish population in Indianapolis serves as a historical microcosm for other interracial and interreligious coalitions that supplemented the movement nationwide. Jewish religious covenants and general inclination towards progressive policy made the sect uniquely fit to serve as an ally for civil rights. In close collaboration with African American leaders, Indianapolis organizations like the JCRC were instrumental in both state policy advocacy and active protests. Both of these minority communities have a shared history of discrimination in both the United States and the greater western world. This shared struggle allowed bonds of kinship to be formed.

The Jewish and African American communities have been longstanding allies in the fight for mutual civil rights. Early Jewish activists were heavily involved in the creation of pro African American organizations such as the NAACP. These ties remained strong in the organization as well as other civil rights groups leading into the late 1930s.[3] The onset of World War Two changed the nature of civil rights advocacy. The post-war period was an environment that cultivated especially strong advocacy for civil rights in the Jewish community. By the juxtaposition the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Europe to the social injustices on American soil, there was a

[1] Krista Kinslow, "The Road to Freedom is Long and Winding: Jewish Involvement in the Indianapolis Civil Rights Movement," *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 108, no. 1 (March 2012): 1–34 at 1.

[2] "Near Northside Theater Drops Jimcrow Policy," *The Indianapolis Recorder*, July 17, 1948.

[3] Lori Harrison-Kahan, "Scholars and Knights: W. E. B. Du Bois, J. E. Spingarn, and the NAACP," *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 18 no. 1 (2011): 63–87 at 68.

shift in Semitic civil rights rhetoric that becomes more relevant and powerful. The horrors of the Holocaust fundamentally changed both internal and external perceptions of Jewish identity. As open anti-Semitism in America began to decline, Jews forged an emotional link between the victims of the Holocaust and the oppression of African Americans in America. Politically, liberal Judaism moved into the mainstream and civil rights was a premier issue to Jewish leaders. In a 1955 essay Jewish historian and Civil Rights advocate Louis Reschemes provides an example of the parallels that Jews drew from their own victimization to that of the African American struggle:

> We Jews have known in our lives and the lives of our fathers the problems which have confronted the Negro. And in our own day the lesson that men have had to relearn in every generation, that the rights of all men are interrelated, and no minority group is safe while others are the victims of persecution, has been seared into our minds and hearts through the burning flesh of six million of our brethren in Europe. [4]

Dramatic images of the Holocaust were often used as metaphors for the oppression of African Americans. Leaders of Jewish communities would use these images to shame segregationist Jews and call liberal Jews to action. Key elements of Jewish faith were also critical in creating a revival of Jewish activism. The Jewish tenant of *Tzedakah* (Hebrew for righteousness) commands every Jew to humbly serve their community and their non-Jewish neighbors.[5] In addition, the tensions of the rising Cold War also had a significant impact on the Jewish mobilization in defense of the Civil Rights movement. In an effort to further assimilate Jewish culture, the idea of "Americanness" was pervasive in Jewish society. As communism and democracy clashed on a world stage, Jewish communities made American values like equality and individuality a central part of their belief system. Marc Dollinger articulated the perceived connection between respectable "Americanness" and civil rights endeavors in this way. "In the North, the civil rights movement offered Jews a powerful means to identify as pluralist and civically responsible American citizens. Constitutional guarantees of legal equality, critical to the story of American Jewish social mobility, proved elusive in the black South." [6] By seeking to extend the fundamental American values of liberty and individualism to other minorities, Jews understood that their own group would also rise socially. The relationship between the national Jewish community and the struggle for civil rights is critical to understanding how the shared oppression and glorification of American ideals vigorously mobilized the Semitic communities of Indianapolis and other like

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[4] Quoted by Michael E. Staub in "Negros are Not Jews: Race, Holocaust Consciousness, and the Rise of Jewish Neoconservatism," *Radical History Review*, vol. 75 (Fall 1999): 3–27 at 6.

[5] Kinslow, "The Road to Freedom is Long and Winding," 4.

[6] Marc Dollinger, "Jewish Identities in 20th Century America," *Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 24 no. 1 (October 2003): 9–28 at 18.

cities. Both the social climate and geographical location of Indianapolis made it a regional epicenter for a plethora of civil rights groups.

From 1948 forward, the joint efforts of these groups focused on two key areas of discrimination: school segregation and unfair housing practices. Much of the work of the Indianapolis Chapter of the NAACP and the JCRC focused on changing and strengthening Indiana state laws to provide more rights to African Americans. In 1949, Indiana House Bill 242 formally desegregated Indiana schools.[7] While this was important in establishing legal precedent, in practical terms school districting policies largely maintained segregation. Because students had to attend the school district in which they lived, African Americans in poorer communities were still confined to traditionally Black schools. These conditions gave the NAACP and the JCRC their next platform for reform: affordable housing and equal opportunity home loans. As articulated in an opinion piece in a 1957 edition of the *Jewish Post,* "Housing Discrimination is at the top of the bill because it is the germ from which all other forms of discrimination spring."[8] Recognizing their limited mobility in the housing market, Jews and African Americans understood that this was not only an attack on their ability to attain a higher status in society, but also an attempt to degrade the family unit by making the evidence of segregation present even in their domestic life.

Housing discrimination in Indianapolis manifested via two main components. First, discrimination by realtors as well as loan providers created systemic barriers to middle and upper-class white neighborhoods. In an investigation regarding unfair housing practices in Indianapolis a lead official of the Anti-Defamation League stated, "It is my understanding that the major white real estate firms in the community are not interested in developing a reputation as an organization which conveys property to negroes."[9] Defying the racial status quo would have serious social and business consequences for lenders and property owners. The second component was a shortage of new development housing in African American communities. Because these communities lacked economic prosperity, the development of new homes and facilities was not thought to be possible. In response to the issue of development, the American Jewish Society for Civil Service partnered with Flanner Homes Inc. to begin a "self-help" housing development project. The program gave members of African American communities the tools and instruction to build their own homes.[10] Programs like this and the efforts for legislative change show that Jewish organizations were using comprehensive strategies and religious networking to fight racism. Participation in peaceful protest and displays of public support were equally important gestures of solidarity.

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[7] Kinslow, "The Road to Freedom is Long and Winding," 14.

[8] Andrew W. Ramsey, "NAACP Invoices Local Needs," *The Jewish Post,* February 23, 1957, 10.

[9] Kinslow, "The Road to Freedom is Long and Winding: Jewish Involvement in the Indianapolis Civil Rights Movement," 21.

[10] Kinslow, "The Road to Freedom is Long and Winding," 18.

Rabbi Maurice Davis is one of the most important characters of the Civil Rights narrative in Indianapolis. Davis's passion for equality is representative of many Jewish people in Indianapolis. Davis spent his career advocating for civil rights but an incident with his son at an Indianapolis area country club gave the meaning of prejudice a more personal meaning. The rabbi's son was denied entrance to the club's swimming pool because of anti-Semitic policies. When *the Jewish Post* published his story, Davis used the incident to call attention to larger national issues, including civil rights.[11] By 1962, Davis had become a leader in the greater Indianapolis community and used a regular column to discuss issues of equality. In a September issue of *the Post* Davis said: "Segregation and discrimination lead to bombing and lynching as surely as anti-Semitism leads to Auschwitz and Buchenwald. And any man who walks that path, has not the right to be amazed where it leads. We who know the end of the road, must say this openly, and believe this implicitly, and practice it publicly. And privately. And always."[12]

Sentiments such as these made Davis' dedication to equality above reproach. His willingness to serve the cause became even more clear when, in 1965 Davis and David Goldstein, Chair of the JCRC, answered Dr. Martin Luther King's call from Selma, Alabama.[13] The Indianapolis coalition's participation in the March 7th protest was a powerful sign that many Jews were willing to support civil rights at any cost, even physical harm. Davis was able to use descriptions of his experiences in Selma to gain further support for civil rights in Indianapolis. Jewish policy advocacy and community improvement projects had an immeasurable effect on advancing civil rights for the greater part of three decades.

Mobilization and dedication on the part of religious and social justice coalitions created a powerful force for legal and societal change. Personal narratives like that of Rabbi Davis give civil rights history a critical human emotional connection. Active participation in civil rights demonstrations and the motivational context behind the demonstrates that efforts for civil rights in Indianapolis were congruent to other intersectional partnerships around the country. Communities that did their part in the national Civil Rights movement showed a dedication to improving their society that embodied classical "Americanness." Indianapolis is a prime example of these two minority groups coming together to fight discrimination both through legislation and active citizenship.

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[11] Jill Weiss Simins, "Walking With Dr. King: The Civil Rights Legacy of Rabbi Maurice Davis," Indiana Historical Bureau of the Indiana State Library, https://blog.history.in.gov/category/20th-century/civil-rights-movement (accessed March 30, 2020).

[12] Maurice Davis, "We Who Know the Road Must Speak Out," *The Jewish Post,* September 27, 1963, 10.

[13] Jill Weiss Simins, "Walking With Dr. King: The Civil Rights Legacy of Rabbi Maurice Davis."

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