Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.--Thoughts on Jews and Israel

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Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of America's most eloquent voices for civil rights, for humanity and for peace. Here are memorable quotes about Jews and Israel that contain King's stirring calls to live up to our potential and to look at others with fairness and warmth.

Jews and African-Americans:

When King was invited to address the American Jewish Committee convention in 1958, he noted the great similarities between Jews and African Americans, who both experienced hatred and prejudice and who worked to overcome that hatred:

My people were brought to America in chains. Your people were driven here to escape the chains fashioned for them in Europe. Our unity is born of our common struggle for centuries, not only to rid ourselves of bondage, but to make oppression of any people by others an impossibility.

Anti-Semitism and racism:

There are Hitlers loose in America today, both in high and low places… As the tensions and bewilderment of economic problems become more severe, history('s) scapegoats, the Jews, will be joined by new scapegoats, the Negroes. The Hitlers will seek to divert people's minds and turn their frustration and anger to the helpless, to the outnumbered. Then whether the Negro and Jew shall live in peace will depend upon how firmly they resist, how effectively they reach the

minds of the decent Americans to halt this deadly diversion…. (May 14, 1958 address to the National Biennial Convention of the American Jewish Congress)

Probably more than any other ethnic group, the Jewish community has been sympathetic and has stood as an ally to the Negro in his struggle for justice. (March 26, 1968 address to the 68th annual convention of the Rabbinical Assembly)

Learning from Jewish history:

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself. The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses stood in the Pharaoh's court centuries ago and cried, 'Let my people go'. This is a kind of opening chapter in a continuing story. The present struggle in our country is a later chapter in the same unfolding story. Something within has reminded the Negro of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. (Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963)

It was 'illegal' to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. (Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963)

Zionism and Anti-Semitism:

On October 27, 1967, just a few months after the Six Day War, King had dinner with students from Harvard University in Boston. Professor Seymour Martin Lipset was present and recalls how one of the students criticized Zionists. King was incensed, saying "Don't talk like that!" - and continuing:

When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You're talking anti-Semitism!

The following year, just days before his tragic murder, King addressed an annual Jewish assembly and explained his pro-Israel feelings at greater length. He explained that Israel and Arab states had different conceptions of what constitutes "peace". Arab states are consumed with inequality and require fundamental changes in their societies before they can feel secure. Israel, in contrast, desires only secure borders and for the world to recognize its right to exist.

Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all of our might to protect its right to exist, its territorial integrity and the right to use whatever sea lanes it needs. I see Israel, and never mind saying it, as 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. (March 26, 1968 address to the 68th annual convention of the Rabbinical Assembly)

Fighting for Soviet Jews:

On December 11, 1966, King addressed 50,000 people in 32 states at demonstrations for Soviet Jews via a telephone hookup. His eloquent words reminded the crowds that they all had a vital responsibility to work to help their fellow Jews who were trapped in the Soviet Union. Here are three quotes from that stirring speech:

We cannot sit complacently by the wayside while our Jewish brothers in the Soviet Union face the possible extinction of their cultural and spiritual life. Those that sit at rest, while others take pains, are tender turtles and buy their quite with disgrace.

The denial of human rights anywhere is a threat to the affirmation of human rights everywhere.

Jewish history and culture are a part of everyone’s heritage, whether he be Jewish, Christian or Muslim.

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968 at the age of 39. His stirring words continue to live on, inspiring us to work towards his vision of a world without hatred, without prejudice. His palpable affection and respect for Israel and the Jewish people can inspire us today.