

As published in the [New York Daily News](#)

### **Amid Palestinian Protests, A Call for Black-Jewish Unity**

By Allan Chernoff

As the son of a Holocaust survivor who was tortured and forced into slave labor, I have always felt deep empathy for people whose ancestors also had to endure the indignity of slavery. But, sadly, on *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, which begins tonight, many young African Americans, some of whose great-great-grandparents were slaves, feel little affinity with me, an American Jew, whose family suffered at the hands of racist oppressors.

One of the most important coalitions in American civil rights history is the Black-Jewish partnership. But in the aftermath of the Hamas terrorist massacre of 1,200 people in Israel and the ensuing brutal war against Hamas, Blacks are finding [common cause](#) with Palestinian activists, [supporting](#), and even participating in their protests on college campuses.

This is concerning to many American Jews who perceive antisemitic tones emanating from the protests, particularly the lead chant: “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free.” To the Jewish ear, this sounds like a clear call for the elimination of the State of Israel and its Jews.

Sensitized by our history of oppression, Jews are alarmed when we see a Black Columbia University protest leader [declaring](#), “Zionists don’t deserve to live”; when days after the Hamas attack, the Black Lives Matters’ Chicago chapter [posts](#) on social media the declaration, “I Stand With Palestine” alongside an image of a paraglider with a Palestinian flag—a reference to the gliders some terrorists used to infiltrate Israel; and when self-proclaimed “Black radicals” promote the [antisemitic canard](#) that “Zionism is White Supremacy.” These may be the views of extremists, but they hit a nerve, particularly at a time when Jewish college students across the nation face [harassment and intimidation](#) on campus.

The fact is, American Jews have had a great and proud history of standing with Blacks at the forefront of the civil rights movement. Jewish leaders joined with W.E.B. DuBois to [found](#) the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council worked with A. Philip Randolph and Roy Wilkins to [create](#) the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. Jews comprised half of the young people engaged in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964 to challenge Jim Crow laws. As they worked to

register Blacks to vote that summer, three young civil rights volunteers, a Black man, James Cheney, and two Jews, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. At the 1963 March on Washington, immediately [preceding](#) the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a Dream" speech, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, then President of the American Jewish Congress, spoke of the deep bond between American Jews and African Americans, [describing](#) it as "a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience." In Selma, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched arm-in-arm with Dr. King, an experience so meaningful that Heschel [said](#), "I felt my legs were praying."

Dr. King had a close bond with American Jewry, [declaring](#) that "Our unity is born of our common struggle for centuries." His ears were well attuned to antisemitism. The Harvard historian Seymour Martin Lipsett wrote of a dinner he attended in Boston where Dr. King [spoke with Black college students](#): "One of the young men present happened to make some remark against the Zionists. Dr. King snapped at him and said, 'Don't talk like that! When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You're talking anti-Semitism!'"

Do today's young Blacks know anything of this history?

Ever since the days of the civil rights movement, the American Jewish community has continued to enthusiastically advocate for equality and against racism.

Yet as the Jewish community maintains its commitment to racial justice, it is also fearful of a rise in religious bias. Jews have not experienced such an [outpouring of antisemitic hate](#) in decades.

We know how quickly bias can devolve into widespread discrimination and violence.

In spite of all we have endured, from the Holocaust to the October 7<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack, Jews maintain hope for mutual acceptance and respect, and even a belief that peace is possible. Indeed, "The Hope"—*Hatikvah*—is the title of Israel's national anthem. But who will be our partners? As we pray for peace and the release of all hostages, those who stand on opposing sides of the Israel-Hamas conflict need to do less shouting and more talking. Somehow, Blacks and Jews, who should be natural allies, must find a way to hold hands once again and restore our frayed coalition.

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