

(1963) Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Religion and Race”

Posted on August 12, 2017 contributed by: [BlackPast](#)



Martin Luther King, Jr. (center) and Abraham Joshua Heschel (2nd from front right), march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, March 21, 1965 [Fair use](#) image

On January 14, 1963, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel gave the speech “Religion and Race,” at a conference of the same name that assembled in Chicago, Illinois. There he met Dr. Martin Luther King and the two became friends. Rabbi Heschel marched with Dr. King at Selma, Alabama in 1965. The speech Rabbi Heschel gave at the 1963 conference appears below.

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses’ words were: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me.” While Pharaoh retorted: “Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.”

The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.

Let us dodge no issues. Let us yield no inch to bigotry, let us make no compromise with callousness.

In the words of William Lloyd Garrison, “I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject [slavery] I do not wish to think, to speak, or to write with moderation. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard.”

Religion and race. How can the two be uttered together? To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God’s beloved child. To act in the spirit of race is to sunder, to slash, to dismember the flesh of living humanity. Is this the way to honor a father: to torture his child? How can we hear the word “race” and feel no self reproach?

Race as a *normative* legal or political concept is capable of expanding to formidable dimensions. A mere thought, it extends to become a way of thinking, a highway of insolence, as well as a standard of values, overriding truth, justice, beauty. As a standard of values and behavior, race operates as a comprehensive doctrine, as racism. And racism is worse than idolatry. *Racism is satanism*, unmitigated evil.

Few of us seem to realize how insidious, how radical, how universal an evil racism is. Few of us realize that racism is man’s gravest threat to man, the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason, the maximum of cruelty for a minimum of thinking.

Perhaps this Conference should have been called “Religion *or* Race.” You cannot worship God and at the same time look at man as if he were a horse.

Shortly before he died, Moses spoke to his people. “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19). The aim of this conference is first of all to state clearly the stark alternative. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have set before you religion and race, life and death, blessing and curse. *Choose life*.

“Race prejudice, a universal human ailment, is the most recalcitrant aspect of the evil in man” (Reinhold Niebuhr), a treacherous denial of the existence of God.

What is an idol? Any god *who is mine but not yours*, any god concerned with me but not with you, *is an idol*.

Faith in God is not simply an *afterlife insurance policy*. *Racial or religious bigotry* must be recognized for what it is: *satanism, blasphemy*.

In several ways man is set apart from all beings created in six days. The Bible does not say, God created the plant or the animal; it says, God created different kinds of plants, different kinds of animals (Genesis 1: 11 12, 21-25). In striking contrast, it does not say, God created different kinds of man, men of different colors and races; it proclaims, God created one single man. From one single man all men are descended.

To think of man in terms of white, black, or yellow is more than an error. It is an *eye disease, a cancer of the soul*.

The redeeming quality of man lies in his ability to sense his kinship with all men. Yet there is a deadly poison that inflames the eye, making us see the generality of race but not the uniqueness of the human face. Pigmentation is what counts. The Negro is a stranger to many souls. There are people in our country whose moral sensitivity suffers a blackout when confronted with the black man's predicament.

How many disasters do we have to go through in order to realize that all of humanity has a stake in the liberty of one person; whenever one person is offended, we are all hurt. What begins as inequality of some inevitably ends as inequality of all.

In referring to the Negro in this paper we must, of course, always keep equally in mind the plight of all individuals belonging to a racial, religious, ethnic, or cultural minority.

This Conference should dedicate itself not only to the problem of the Negro but also to the problem of the white man, not only to the plight of the colored but also to the situation of the white people, to the cure of a disease affecting the spiritual substance and condition of every one of us. What we need is an NAAAP, a National Association for the Advancement of All People. Prayer and prejudice cannot dwell in the same heart. Worship without compassion is worse than self-deception; it is an abomination.

Thus, the problem is not only how to do justice to the colored people, it is also how to stop the profanation of God's name by dishonoring the Negro's name.

One hundred years ago the emancipation was proclaimed. It is time for the white man to strive for *self-emancipation*, to set himself free of bigotry, to stop being a slave to wholesale contempt, a passive recipient of slander.

“Again, I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them!” (Ecclesiastes 4:1)

There is a form of oppression which is more painful and more scathing than physical injury or economic privation. It is *public humiliation*. What afflicts my conscience is that my face, whose skin happens not to be dark, instead of radiating the likeness of God, has come to be taken as an image of haughty assumption and overbearance. Whether justified or not, I, the white man, have become in the eyes of others a symbol of arrogance and pretension, giving offense to other human beings, hurting their pride, even without intending it. My very presence inflicting insult!

My heart is sick when I think of the anguish and the sighs, of the quiet tears shed in the nights in the overcrowded dwellings in the slums of our great cities, of the pangs of despair, of the cup of humiliation that is running over.

The crime of murder is tangible and punishable by law. The sin of insult is imponderable, invisible. When blood is shed, human eyes see red; when a heart is crushed, it is only God who shares the pain.

In the Hebrew language one word denotes both crimes. "Bloodshed," in Hebrew, is the word that denotes both murder and humiliation. The law demands: one should rather be killed than commit murder. Piety demands: one should rather commit suicide than offend a person publicly. It is better, the Talmud insists, to throw oneself alive into a burning furnace than to humiliate a human being publicly.

He who commits a major sin may repent and be forgiven. But he who offends a person publicly will have no share in the life to come.

It is not within the power of God to forgive the sins committed toward men. We must first ask for forgiveness of those whom our society has wronged before asking for the forgiveness of God.

Daily we patronize institutions which are visible manifestations of arrogance toward those whose skin differs from ours. Daily we cooperate with people who are guilty of active discrimination.

How long will *I* continue to be tolerant of, even a participant in, acts of embarrassing and humiliating human beings, in restaurants, hotels, buses, or parks, employment agencies, public schools and universities? One ought rather be shamed than put others to shame.

Our rabbis taught: "Those who are insulted but do not insult, hear themselves reviled without answering, act through love and rejoice in suffering, of them Scripture says: 'They who love the Lord are as the sun when rising in full splendor' (Judges 5:31)."

Let us cease to be apologetic, cautious, timid. Racial tension and strife is both sin and punishment. The *Negro's plight*, the blighted areas in the large cities, are they not the fruit of our sins?

By negligence and silence, we have all become accessory before the God of mercy to the injustice committed against the Negroes by men of our nation. Our derelictions are many. We have failed to demand, to insist, to challenge, to chastise.

In the words of Thomas Jefferson, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

There are several ways of dealing with our bad conscience. (1) We can extenuate our responsibility; (2) we can keep the Negro out of our sight; (3) we can alleviate our qualms by pointing to the progress made; (4) we can delegate the responsibility to the courts; (5) we can silence our conscience by cultivating indifference; (6) we can dedicate our minds to issues of a far more sublime nature.

(1) Modern thought has a tendency to extenuate personal responsibility. Understanding the complexity of human nature, the interrelationship of individual and society, of consciousness and the subconscious, we find it difficult to isolate the deed from the circumstances in which it was done. Our enthusiasm is easily stunned by realizing the ramifications and complexity of the problem we face and the enormous obstacles we encounter in trying to implement the philosophy affirmed in the 13th and 14th Amendments as well as in the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court. Yet this general tendency, for all its important correctives and insights, has often had the effect of obscuring our essential vision, aiding our conscience to grow scales: excuses, pretense, self pity. The sense of guilt may disappear; no crime is absolute, no sin devoid of apology. Within the limits of the human mind, relativity may be true and merciful. Yet the mind's scope embraces but a fragment of society, a few instants of history; it thinks of what has happened, it is unable to imagine what might have happened. The qualms of my conscience are easily cured—even while the agony for which I am accountable continues unabated.

(2) Another way of dealing with a bad conscience is to keep the Negro out of sight.

The Word proclaims: Love thy neighbor! *So we make it impossible for him to be a neighbor.* Let a Negro move into our neighborhood and madness overtakes the residents. To quote an editorial in the *Christian Century* of Dec. 26, 1962:

The ghettoization of the Negro in American society is increasing. Three million Negroes—roughly one sixth of the nation's Negro population—are now congested in five of the greatest metropolitan centers of the north. The alienation of the Negro from the mainstream of American life proceeds apace. The Negro is discovering to his sorrow that the mobility which he gained in the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution nearly a hundred years ago merely enables him to move from one ghetto to another. A partial apartheid—economic, social, political and religious—continues to be enforced by the white people of the U.S. They use various pressures—some open, some covert—to keep the Negro isolated from the nation's social, cultural and religious community, the result being black islands surrounded by a vast white sea. Such enclaves in American society not only destroy the cohesiveness of the nation but also offend the Negro's dignity and restrict his opportunity. These segregated islands are also an embarrassment to white people who want an open society but are trapped by a system they despise. Restricted housing is the chief offender. So long as the racially exclusive patterns of suburban America continue, the Negro will remain an exile in his own land.

(3) To some Americans the situation of the Negro, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim. So many revolutionary changes have taken place in the field of civil rights, so many deeds of charity are being done; so much decency radiates day and night. Our standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent. The conscience builds its confines, is subject to fatigue, longs for comfort. Yet those who are hurt, and He who inhabits eternity, neither slumber nor sleep.

(4) Most of us are content to delegate the problem to the courts, as if justice were a matter for professionals or specialists. But to do justice is what God demands of every man: it is the supreme commandment, and one that cannot be fulfilled vicariously.

Righteousness must dwell not only in the places where justice is judicially administered. There are many ways of evading the law and escaping the arm of justice. Only a few acts of violence are brought to the attention of the courts. As a rule, those who know how to exploit are endowed with the skill to justify their acts, while those who are easily exploited possess no skill in pleading their own cause. Those who neither exploit nor are exploited are ready to fight when their own interests are harmed; they will not be involved when not personally affected. Who shall plead for the helpless? Who shall prevent the epidemic of injustice that no court of justice is capable of stopping?

In a sense, the calling of the prophet may be described as that of an advocate or champion, speaking for those who are too weak to plead their own cause. Indeed, the major activity of the prophets was *interference*, remonstrating about wrongs inflicted on other people, meddling in affairs which were seemingly neither their concern nor their responsibility. A prudent man is he who minds his own business, staying away from questions which do not involve his own interests, particularly when not authorized to step in—and prophets were given no mandate by the widows and orphans to plead their cause. The prophet is a person who is not tolerant of wrongs done to others, who resents other people's injuries. He even calls upon others to be the champions of the poor. It is to every member of the community, not alone to the judges, that Isaiah directs his plea:

Seek justice, relieve the oppressed,
Judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.
Isaiah 1:17

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: *indifference to evil*. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted.

The prophets' great contribution to humanity was the discovery *of the evil of indifference*. One may be decent and sinister, pious and sinful.

The prophet is a person who suffers the harms done to others. Wherever a crime is committed, it is as if the prophet were the victim and the prey. The prophet's angry words cry. The wrath of God is a lamentation. All prophecy is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil! He is always concerned, He is personally affected by what man does to man. He is a God of pathos.

(6) In condemning the clergymen who joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in protesting against local statutes and practices which denied constitutional liberties to groups of citizens on account of race, a white preacher declared: "The job of the minister is to lead the souls of men to God, not to bring about confusion by getting tangled up in transitory social problems."

In contrast to this definition, the prophets passionately proclaim that God himself is concerned with “the transitory social problems,” with the blights of society, with the affairs of the market place.

What is the essence of being a prophet? *A prophet is a person who holds God and men in one thought at one time, at all times.* Our tragedy begins with *the segregation of God*, with the bifurcation of the secular and sacred. We worry more about the purity of dogma than about the *integrity of love*. *We think of God in the past tense* and refuse to realize that *God is always present and never, never past*; that God may be more intimately *present in slums than in mansions, with those who are smarting under the abuse of the callous.*

There are, of course, many among us whose record in dealing with the Negroes and other minority groups is unspotted. However, an honest estimation of the moral state of our society will disclose: *Some are guilty, but all are responsible.* If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the public climate of opinion, an individual’s crime discloses society’s corruption. In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, racial discrimination would be infrequent rather than common.

That equality is a good thing, a fine goal, may be generally accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the *monstrosity of inequality*. Seen from the perspective of prophetic faith, the predicament of justice is the predicament of God.

Of course, more and more people are becoming aware of the Negro problem, but they fail to grasp its being a personal problem. People are increasingly fearful of social tension and disturbance. However, so long as our society is more concerned to prevent racial strife than to prevent humiliation, the cause of strife, its moral status will be depressing, indeed.

The history of interracial relations is a nightmare. Equality of all men, a platitude to some minds, remains a scandal to many hearts. Inequality is the ideal setting for the abuse of power, a perfect justification for man’s cruelty to man. Equality is an obstacle to callousness, setting a limit to power. Indeed, the history of mankind may be described as the history of the tension between power and equality.

Equality is an interpersonal relationship, involving both a claim and a recognition. My claim to equality has its logical basis in the recognition of my fellow men’s identical claim. Do I not forfeit my own rights by denying to my fellow men the rights I claim for myself?

It is not humanity that endows the sky with inalienable stars. It is not society that bestows upon every man his inalienable rights. Equality of all men is not due to man’s innocence or virtue. Equality of man is due to *God’s love and commitment to all men.*

The ultimate worth of man is due neither to his virtue nor to his faith. *It is due to God’s virtue, to God’s faith. Wherever you see a trace of man, there is the presence of God.* From the perspective of eternity our recognition of equality of all men seems as generous an act as the acknowledgment that stars and planets have a right to be.

How can I withhold from others what does not belong to me?

Equality as a religious commandment goes beyond the principle of equality before the law. Equality as a religious commandment means *personal involvement*, fellowship, mutual reverence and concern. It means my being hurt when a Negro is offended. It means that I am bereaved whenever a Negro is *disfranchised*:

The shotgun blasts that have been fired at the house of James Meredith's father in Kosciusko, Mississippi, make us cry for shame wherever we are.

There is no insight more disclosing: *God is One, and humanity is one*. There is no possibility more frightening: God's name may be desecrated.

God is every man's pedigree. He is either the Father of all men or of no man. The image of God is either in every man or in no man.

From the point of view of moral philosophy, it is our duty to have regard for every man. Yet such regard is contingent upon the moral merit of the particular man. From the point of view of religious philosophy, it is our duty to have regard and compassion for every man regardless of his moral merit. God's covenant is with all men, and we must never be oblivious of *the equality of the divine dignity* of all men. The image of God is in the criminal as well as in the saint. How can my regard for man be contingent upon his merit, if I know that in the eyes of God I myself may be without merit!

You shall not make yourself a graven image or any likeness of God. The making and worshiping of images is considered an abomination, vehemently condemned in the Bible. The world and God are not of the same essence. There can be no man made symbols of God.

And yet there is something in the world that the Bible does regard as a symbol of God. It is not a temple or a tree, it is not a statue or a star. *The symbol of God is man*, every man. How significant is the fact that the term *tselem*, which is frequently used in a damnatory sense for a man-made image of God, as well as the term *demuth*, likeness of which Isaiah claims (40:18), no *demuth* can be applied to God—are employed in denoting man as an image and likeness of God. Man, every man, must be treated with the honor due to a likeness representing the King of kings.

There are many motivations by which prejudice is nourished, many reasons for despising the poor, for keeping the underprivileged in his place. However, the Bible insists that the interests of the poor have precedence over the interests of the rich. The prophets have a bias in favor of the poor.

God seeks out him who is pursued (Ecclesiastes 3:15), even if the pursuer is righteous and the pursued is wicked, because man's condition is God's concern. To discriminate against man is to despise what God demands.

He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker;
But he who is kind to the needy honors Him.
Proverbs 14:31; cf. 17:15

The way we act, the way we fail to act is a disgrace which must not go on forever. This is not a white man's world. This is not a colored man's world. It is God's world. No man has a place in this world who tries to keep another man in his place. It is time for the white man to repent. We have failed to use the avenues open to us to educate the hearts and minds of men, to identify ourselves with those who are underprivileged. But repentance is more than contrition and remorse for sins, for harms done. Repentance means a new insight, a new spirit. It also means a course of action.

Racism is an evil of tremendous power, but God's will transcends all powers. Surrender to despair is surrender to evil. It is important to feel anxiety, it is sinful to wallow in despair.

What we need is a total mobilization of heart, intelligence, and wealth for the purpose of love and justice. God is in search of man, waiting, hoping for man to do His will.

The most practical thing is not to weep but to act and to have faith in God's assistance and grace in our trying to do His will.

This world, this society can be redeemed. God has a stake in our moral predicament. I cannot believe that God will be defeated.

What we face is a human emergency. It will require much devotion, wisdom, and divine grace to eliminate that massive sense of inferiority, the creeping bitterness. It will require a high quality of imaginative sympathy, sustained cooperation both in thought and in action, by individuals as well as by institutions, to weed out memories of frustration, roots of resentment.

We must act even when inclination and vested interests would militate against equality. Human self-interest is often our Nemesis! It is the audacity of faith that redeems us. To have faith is to be ahead of one's normal thoughts, to transcend confused motivations, to lift oneself by one's bootstraps. Mere knowledge or belief is too feeble to be a cure of man's hostility to man, of man's tendency to fratricide. The only remedy is *personal sacrifice*: to abandon, to reject what seems dear and even plausible for the sake of the greater truth; to do more than one is ready to understand for the sake of God. Required is a breakthrough, a *leap of action*. It is the deed that will purify the heart. It is the deed that will sanctify the mind. The deed is the test, the trial, and the risk.

The plight of the Negro must become our most important concern. Seen in the light of our religious tradition, *the Negro problem is God's gift to America*, the test of our integrity, a magnificent spiritual opportunity.

Humanity can thrive only when challenged, when called upon to answer new demands, to reach out for new heights. Imagine how smug, complacent, vapid, and foolish we would be, if we had to subsist on prosperity alone. It is for us to understand that religion is not sentimentality, that

God is not a patron. Religion is a demand, God is a challenge, speaking to us in the language of human situations. His voice is in the dimension of history.

The universe is done. The greater masterpiece still undone, still in the process of being created, is history. For accomplishing His grand design, God needs the help of man. Man is and has the instrument of God, which he may or may not use in consonance with the grand design. Life is clay, and righteousness the mold in which God wants history to be shaped. But human beings, instead of fashioning the clay, deform the shape. God needs mercy, righteousness; His needs cannot be satisfied in space, by sitting in pews, by visiting temples, but in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man is charged with God's mission.

There are those who maintain that the situation is too grave for us to do much about it, that whatever we might do would be "too little and too late," that the most practical thing we can do is "to weep" and to despair. If such a message is true, then God has spoken in vain.

Such a message is four thousand years too late. It is good Babylonian theology. In the meantime, certain things have happened: Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, the Christian Gospel.

History is not all darkness. It was good that Moses did not study theology under the teachers of that message; otherwise, I would still be in Egypt building pyramids. Abraham was all alone in a world of paganism; the difficulties he faced were hardly less grave than ours.

The greatest heresy is despair, despair of men's power for goodness, men's power for love.

It is not enough for us to exhort the Government. What we must do is to set an example, not merely to acknowledge the Negro but to welcome him, not grudgingly but joyously, to take delight in enabling him to enjoy what is due to him. We are all *Pharaohs or slaves of Pharaohs*. It is sad to be a slave of Pharaoh. *It is horrible to be a Pharaoh.*

Daily we should take account and ask: What have I done today *to alleviate the anguish, to mitigate the evil, to prevent humiliation?*

Let there be a grain of prophet in every man!

Our concern must be expressed not symbolically, but literally; not only publicly, but also privately; not only occasionally, but regularly.

What we need is the involvement of every one of us as individuals. What we need is *restlessness*, a constant awareness of the monstrosity of injustice.

The concern for the dignity of the Negro must be an explicit tenet of our creeds. He who offends a Negro, whether as a landowner or employer, whether as waiter or salesgirl, is guilty of offending the majesty of God. No minister or layman has a right to question the principle that reverence for God is shown in reverence for man, that the fear we must feel lest we hurt or humiliate a human being must be as unconditional as fear of God. An act of violence is an act of desecration. To be arrogant toward man is to be blasphemous toward God.

In the words of Pope John XXIII, when opening the Twenty first Ecumenical Council, “divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations.” History has made us all neighbors. The age of moral mediocrity and complacency has run out. This is a time for radical commitment, for radical action.

Let us not forget the story of the sons of Jacob. Joseph, the dreamer of dreams, was sold into slavery by his own brothers. But at the end it was Joseph who rose to be the savior of those who had sold him into captivity.

Mankind lies groaning, afflicted by fear, frustration, and despair. Perhaps it is the will of God that among the Josephs of the future there will be many who have once been slaves and whose skin is dark. The great spiritual resources of the Negroes, their capacity for joy, their quiet nobility, their attachment to the Bible, their power of worship and enthusiasm, may prove a blessing to all mankind.

In the words of the prophet Amos (5:24):
Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like a mighty stream.

A mighty stream, expressive of the vehemence of a never ending, surging, fighting movement - as if obstacles had to be washed away for justice to be done. No rock is so hard that water cannot pierce it. “But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place; the waters wear away the stones” (Job 14:18 f.). Justice is not a mere norm, but a fighting challenge, a restless drive.

Righteousness as a mere tributary, feeding the immense stream of human interests, is easily exhausted and more easily abused. But righteousness is not a trickle; it is God’s power in the world, a torrent, an impetuous drive, full of grandeur and majesty. The surge is choked, the sweep is blocked. Yet the mighty stream will break all dikes.

Justice, people seem to agree, is a principle, a norm, an ideal of the highest importance. We all insist that it ought to be—but it may not be. In the eyes of the prophets, justice is more than an idea or a norm: justice is charged with the omnipotence of God. What ought to be, shall be!