

March 21, 2015

# Memories of Selma – All of Them

**New York, New York** – On March 21, 1965, a diverse group of civil rights activists stood with Martin Luther King, Jr. to begin the third and finally successful march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. As such, it is part of this month's many remembrances of Selma and "Bloody Sunday." But it is more than just a commemoration. Selma is a living challenge to each of us. It challenges us to remember our history -- and the brave women and men who marched and were brutally assaulted. It cries out for us to recall how they returned to Selma to march once, twice, three times, always with more supporters and allies by their side. For the U.S., Selma stands as a beacon reminding us that people can stand against injustice and move forward, especially when we do it together.

That's why the widely praised and Oscar-debated film, *Selma*, is so important. Because it is a media reminder of our history and how we stood together. The only problem is the history is not quite right, and in at least one instance this was an important missed opportunity. By airbrushing renowned Jewish leaders out of the Selma march, the film reframes history, to the detriment of the Jewish community.

In reality, many Jews fought side-by-side with Blacks during the civil rights movement. Some died in the effort, and over half of the white Freedom Riders were Jewish. In Washington, when Dr. King reminded us that every child should be judged by the content of their character in his "I Have a Dream" speech, it was Rabbi Joachim Prinz who preceded him on the podium. But *Selma* edits out an example of how Jews played this critical role.

This is no small matter, especially in days where anti-Semitism is surging and too many people see Jewish people through the lens of stereotypes, forgetting important facts such as the role of Jews in seeking racial justice. If you look at the historic photos of Selma, you can easily find Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel locked arm-in-arm on the frontline of the march from Selma, only one man standing between him and Dr. Martin Luther King. In the film, we only see the great, justice-loving Greek Orthodox Archbishop Iakovos with Dr. King. We also see other Christian and Catholic leaders. Though a Jewish person is clearly present in the background, Rabbi Heschel is nowhere to be found.

This omission of Jewish support for the civil rights movement fails to portray Jews positively and accurately. In so doing, it misses a simple but important opportunity to provide an antidote to the virulent anti-Semitism that is rapidly escalating in the U.S. and, indeed, across the globe. This February, the Pew Research Center reported that harassment of Jews has reached a seven-year high internationally, while hate crimes against Jews rose 35 percent last year as reported by the New York City Police Department.

Anti-Semitism is rising, along with a renewed focus on racism and the many other ways people are ostracized for who they are at school, at work, and in their communities. Take for one example what is going on across college campuses. Jewish students are under assault. This year, in universities around the country, including George Washington University, Berkeley, the University of Oregon, Vanderbilt University and Emory, swastikas decorated frat houses and bathrooms. At UCLA, an otherwise stellar candidate for the student judicial panel (who also happened to be Jewish) was challenged on

her competence to meet the role's requirements solely because of her faith. There, the questioning conflated Judaism with Israeli policies, and then stereotyped the candidate just because she was a Jew.

These are acts of hate. Whether they occur in schools, at work or abroad, whether they are verbal or brutally violent, they are unacceptable whether perpetrated against Jews, the African-American women and men across America who still confront racism on a daily basis, or anyone. As the Selma commemorations come to a close, it is a time to meet its challenge. It is time to take stock of the considerable work that remains for so many people -- and to remember and celebrate the moments when Americans collaborate and work together, despite differences in race, ethnicity, gender. And religion.

Joyce S. Dubensky  
CEO