

# The Delray Democrat

## “I Felt I Was Praying With My Feet” Fighting Racism with Body and Soul<sup>1</sup>

*June Sandra Neal*



March 21, 1965, The Third Selma to Montgomery march:

First Row: John Lewis, an unidentified nun, Dr. Ralph Abernathy, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Ralph Bunche, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth

Second row: Between Dr. King and Ralph Bunche is Rabbi Maurice Davis

One champion of human rights was omitted from the movie *Selma*, a man with a wild, white mane and beard in the front row, near Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., looking more like a biblical prophet than a modern-day civil rights activist. That was Abraham Joshua Heschel, an Orthodox rabbi who was considered one of the greatest Jewish theologians and philosophers of his day.

King and Heschel came from alien worlds yet their intersection was inevitable: to both men, faith meant action. A Polish Jew with a distinguished religious heritage who lost his family in the Holocaust, Heschel found himself a maverick among his Orthodox rabbinic peers in America, who worried that his social activism stirred the cauldron of that volatile recipe: religion and politics. King came from a line of Baptist ministers in Georgia, where he attended segregated public schools. Like Heschel, he found opposition among his own. In 1961, he spoke at the Southern

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<sup>1</sup> *The Delray Democrat*, August 2020, p. 3.

Baptist Theological Seminary, affirming that Christians had a mandate to repair social injustice. The evangelicals didn't like it and many Southern churches stopped donating to the Seminary.

In 1963, Heschel joined King to address the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago: "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."

In the same year, King joined Heschel to speak at the United Synagogue of America's Golden Jubilee Convention in New York, condemning the oppression of Jews in the Soviet Union: "...injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Dr. King called Heschel "my rabbi." Heschel gave a eulogy at King's funeral. In 1965, Heschel joined King at the third, and finally successful, attempt to march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. The event resulted in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This was their moment.

Now is ours. The scourge of recent murders of black people by police and civilians has ignited a national call to action not seen in decades, and new voices are in the air.

Short-term empathy is the nutritional equivalent of a candy bar. In *How To Be An Antiracist*, Professor Ibram Kendi says, "We arrive at demonstrations excited...we convince ourselves we are really doing something to solve the racial problem when we are really doing something to satisfy our feelings...and this fulfillment is fleeting, like a drug high. What if instead of a feelings advocacy we had an outcome advocacy that put equitable outcome before our guilt and anguish?"

Bryan Stevenson, the multi-award-winning social justice advocate, advises we "get proximate," put ourselves into the cause. He created the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Known as the "Lynching Memorial," it lists the names of thousands of black people lynched between the years of 1877-1950.

There is much we can accomplish, if use our collective energy to take on the power, not of a demonstration, but of a revolution.

When asked why he went to Selma, Rabbi Heschel said, "I felt I was praying with my feet."