

Reaffirming Dr. Martin Luther King's Zionist Legacy

Joshua Washington

ABSTRACT

Some voices in the Black American community have attempted to recast Dr. Martin Luther King as a harsh critic of Israel, who, if he were alive today, would join a chorus of the Jewish State's toughest adversaries. Some have attempted to hijack Dr. King's legacy to serve an anti-Semitic agenda. Others have misused his quotes and speeches to justify support for the "Palestinian cause."

However, these claims falsify the historical record, since Dr. King was a staunch Zionist who opposed the Black radical left movement of the late 1960s, which aligned with far Left opponents of Israel. Dr. King championed Israel's security, self-determination, and territorial integrity.

The resurgence of anti-Semitism in the West and an unprecedented ideological assault against Israel in recent years have aroused debate over the historical relationship between Israel and the Black American community. Against the hills and valleys of Black-Jewish relations during the past century, controversy also surrounds the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's stance on Israel and the Jewish people. Some voices in the Black American community have attempted to recast Dr. King as a harsh critic of Israel, who, if he were alive today, would join a chorus of the Jewish state's toughest adversaries.¹



Leaders in a Vietnam war protest stand in silent prayer in Arlington National Cemetery, Feb. 6, 1968. Front row, from left: Rev. Andrew Young, executive vice president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Bishop James P. Shannon, Roman Catholic auxiliary bishop of Minneapolis and St. Paul; Rabbi Abraham Heschel, professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York; the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Photo: AP Photo/Harvey Georges

However, these claims falsify the historical record. Dr. King was a staunch Zionist. The historical record speaks for itself. On March 25, 1968, Dr. King was honored at the 68th Annual Convention of the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism.² At the convention, one rabbi asked him the following question:

“What would you say if you were talking to a Negro intellectual, an editor of a national magazine, and were told, as I have been, that he supported the Arabs against

Israel because color is all-important in this world? In the editor's opinion, the Arabs are colored Asians and the Israelis are white Europeans. Would you point out that more than half of the Israelis are Asian Jews with the same pigmentation as Arabs, or would you suggest that an American Negro should not form judgments on the basis of color? What seems to you an appropriate or an effective response?"

Behind this question stood an anti-Israel sentiment emanating from the more radical civil rights activists at that time in the black community. The radical Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had released a scathing anti-Zionist article called "The Palestine Problem: Test Your Knowledge," wherein members of the committee wrote 32 "Did you know" questions, peddling the same anti-Israel propaganda heard today.³ Some of the false and misleading questions included propagandistic statements such as the following:

- * "Did you know that the Zionists conquered the Arab homes and land through terror, force, and massacres? That they wiped out over 30 Arab villages before and after they took control of the area, they now call "Israel."
- * "Did you know that Zionism, which is a worldwide nationalistic Jewish movement, organized, planned and created the "State of Israel" by sending Jewish immigrants from Europe into Palestine (the heart of the Arab world) to take over land and homes belonging to the Arabs?"
- * "Did you know that the famous European Jews, the Rothschilds, who have long controlled the wealth of many European nations, were involved in the original conspiracy

with the British to create the “State of Israel” and are still among Israel’s chief supporters? That the Rothschilds also control much of Africa’s mineral wealth?”⁴

These and other anti-Israel and anti-Jewish questions were posed in the article. This is what American Jews were facing from the black community, and this is why Dr. King was asked the question.

Reverend King responded in no uncertain terms. “On the Middle East crisis... the response of some of the so-called young militants, again, does not represent the position of the vast majority of Negroes. There are some who are color-consumed, and they see a kind of mystique in being colored, and anything non-colored is condemned. We do not follow that course in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and certainly most of the organizations in the civil rights movement do not follow that course.”

Dr. King went on to say:

“Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all of our might to protect its right to exist, its territorial integrity. 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 almost can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security and that security must be a reality.”

Dr. King continued:

“On the other hand, we must see what peace for the Arabs means in a real sense of security on another level. Peace for the Arabs means the kind of economic security that they so desperately need. These nations, as you

know, are part of that third world of hunger, of disease, of illiteracy. I think that as long as these conditions exist, there will be tensions; there will be the endless quest to find scapegoats. So there is a need for a Marshall Plan for the Middle East, where we lift those who are at the bottom of the economic ladder and bring them into the mainstream of economic security.”

Dr. King was no stranger to Middle East affairs, and his words to the Jewish community at the convention were not only poignant, but also prophetic. The “quest to find scapegoats” also characterizes today’s politics, as white nationalists, far-leftists, and Palestinian social justice warriors accuse Israel of causing the world’s ills, from creating Al Qaeda and ISIS to blood libels, including performing medical experiments on Palestinian women and stealing Palestinian organs.⁵ Prominent university professors have condemned Israel as the root of the world’s problems.⁶ These accusations are duplicitous. As many people know, Israel is a leader in solving many of the world’s greatest problems. It is a global leader in water desalination, agriculture, technology, and research for cures for diseases from diabetes to cancer.

Despite Dr. King’s testimony, some have attempted to hijack his legacy to serve an anti-Semitic agenda. Others have misused his quotes and speeches to justify support for the “Palestinian cause.” Israel’s detractors have insisted that if King were alive today, he would condemn Israel and exclusively support the Palestinians. If Dr. King’s living words will not convince this school of thought, his legacy will make things clearer.

Dr. King’s former attorney, Dr. Clarence Jones, noticed the attempt to claim Dr. King as an enemy of the Jewish state and said this on February 28, 2014:

“I am always a little taken aback. I am seeing people quoting [Dr. King] frequently out of context to develop a thesis, an argument that he would not be in support of the State of Israel. That is absolutely insane. From the standpoint of someone who has represented the great legacy of this extraordinary man, Martin Luther King, Jr., I say to my African American brothers and sisters, the time is now for every African American person, every person of stature in the African American community, to come forward and stand with Israel in the alpine chill of winter, to show that we are ‘wintertime soldiers.’”⁷

In 1975, when the United Nations passed Resolution 3379 stating, “Zionism is a form of racism,” Dr. King had already been assassinated seven years prior. Fortunately, his legacy lived on to fight this resolution. In the same year, the Black Americans Supporting Israel Committee (BASIC) was formed.

BASIC was founded by civil rights activist and the late Dr. King’s right-hand man, Bayard Rustin, along with the Civil Rights Movement leader A. Philip Randolph. Not only was it a black Zionist movement, but it was a response to the anti-Israel sentiment rising within the black community. These were its tenets, which are as relevant today as they were in 1975:⁸

1. We condemn the anti-Jewish “blacklist.”

We have fought too long and too hard to root out discrimination from our land to sit idly while foreign interests import bigotry into America. Having suffered so greatly from such prejudice, we consider most repugnant

efforts by Arab states to use the economic power of their newly acquired oil wealth to boycott business firms that deal with Israel or that have Jewish owners, directors or executives and to impose anti-Jewish preconditions for investments in this country.

2. We believe blacks and Jews have common interests in democracy and justice.

In the fight against discrimination, black Americans and American Jews have shared profound and enduring common interests that far transcend any differences between us. Jews, through individuals and organizations, have been among the most staunch allies in the struggle for racial justice, sharing with us the conviction that equality is indivisible and that no minority is secure in its rights if the rights of any are Impaired.

3. We support democratic Israel's right to exist.

The democratic values that have sustained our struggle in America are also the source of our admiration for Israel and her impressive social achievements. No nation is without imperfections. But Israel's are far outweighed by the freedom of her democratic society. Only in Israel, among the nations of the Middle East, are political freedoms and civil liberties secure. All religions are free and secure in their observance. Education is free and universal. Social welfare is highly advanced. Her communal farms (Kibbutzim) are models of social idealism, creative innovation, cooperative spirit. Israel's labor movement, the *Histadrut*, has earned the deep respect of freed trade unionists throughout the world.

4. Arab oil prices have had disastrous effects upon blacks in America and in Africa.

The impact of the massive increases in the price of oil has fallen disproportionately on the shoulders of black Americans. But we are not alone in our suffering. Millions of men, women, and children in Black Africa face starvation because the economies of their countries, already crippled by drought, were further weakened because of oil price increases. The chief cause of Black Africa's disastrous economic situation is the price that the Arabs are exacting for oil – at the same time that they paid lip service to “African solidarity.” The Arab oil-producing states have offered only small loans to the Black African nations, and then only in return for humiliating political concessions. Israel, small and isolated as it is, has done much to aid the economic development of Black Africa through creative technical programs. Together with other Americans, we enthusiastically join in reaffirming the rights of Israel exist as a sovereign state.

5. We support peace through mutual recognition.

All people long to see an end to the tragic Arab-Israeli conflict. We have learned from our struggle here in America that the only way to resolve a conflict of nationalities is through mutual acceptance and reconciliation. The Arabs have refused to accept the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Israel consistently demonstrated the desire to make concessions in the interest of peace with her Arab neighbors. But she has refused to accept the conditions that would threaten her existence as an independent sovereign nation.

6. We support genuine Palestinian self-determination.

We support the rights of the Palestinians to genuine self-determination, but not at the expense of the rights of Jews to independence and statehood, and not at the command of economic blackmailers or of terrorists who would force their own “solution” at the point of a gun. We have compassion for all who have suffered in this conflict, not least for the Palestinian refugees. But who can avoid asking why so many of these people continue to live in poverty in the midst of Arab wealth?

The spokesmen for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) have been elected. They represent only themselves. Who can forget the murder of Israeli athletes at the Olympic games, the bomb letters, the airplane hijackings and attacks on the ground, sudden massacre of the innocent civilians at the Tel Aviv airport? Regardless of what the Arab world calls it, in the horrified shock of the people, it's indiscriminate murder of innocents.

7. We will work for peace.

In the months ahead, we will work for a just and stable peace, a peace that will not be a prelude to a new war but the beginning of an era of cooperation and goodwill between Israel and her Arab neighbors.

BASIC garnered support from hundreds of prominent black American figures, including Hank Aaron, Dorothy Maynor, Harry Belafonte, Rosa Parks, Count Basie, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., Coretta Scott King, and Lionel Hampton, who also served as treasurer.



Street sign for Martin Luther King Street in Jerusalem.

Photo: Tirza Shorr

BASIC was born just after UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, which declared that Zionism is racism. Bayard Rustin responded to that resolution in a column, writing:

“Zionism is not racism, but the legitimate expression of the Jewish people’s self-determination...From our 400 year experience with slavery, segregation, and discrimination, we know that Zionism is not racism.”⁹

Little has changed in the past 45 years regarding the PLO's attempts to delegitimize Zionism and the Jewish State. In the aftermath of the UN General Assembly's cynical passage of Res. 3379, Rustin condemned the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as "an organization committed to racism, terrorism, and authoritarianism," which promoted Israel hatred so that the Palestinian leaders didn't have to "liberate their people from poverty and misery." When Rustin saw a rise in black support of the PLO, he stated in a *New York Times* article entitled "To Blacks: Condemn P.L.O. Terrorism,"¹⁰ that by supporting the PLO, the black community faced three risks:

"First, we risk causing serious divisions within our own ranks; second, we risk the forfeiture of our own moral prestige, which is based on a long and noble tradition of nonviolence; and third, we risk becoming the unwitting accomplices of an organization [committed] to the bloody destruction of Israel — indeed of the Jewish people."

Rustin's riposte to the PLO's "Zionism is Racism" canard, like King's condemnation of it, proved prophetic. Today, the West has embraced the still terror-supporting PLO and the Palestinian Authority as a legitimate state among the nations, when in truth, the PLO's ideological positions vis-a-vis eliminating Israel are the same as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and the Iranian regime's Hezbollah terror proxy.

This reigning moral confusion has caused Israel to be outcast in some mainstream Western circles, delegitimized and defamed particularly in academia, and even among some members in the U.S. House of Representatives. History has come full circle; Israel has come to be seen by some of its vociferous detractors as the villain and the PA-PLO as the hero. This moral confusion has

created rifts and divisions in the West, and no less in the Black American community.

The fight we Black Americans are facing now is one against division within our ranks. We face a critical challenge: Will we continue the legacy of Martin Luther King and support and strengthen Israel? Or will we delegitimize and weaken the Jewish state, risking inadvertent support for terrorism, and fail to see anti-Zionism as the new anti-Semitism that Dr. King warned us about more than 50 years ago?¹¹

Like King and Rustin, we, as Black Americans, will stand and fight. We must stand for moral clarity, speak out for Zion's sake, and fight for the truth of the historical record for the sake of our community.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/19/opinion/sunday/martin-luther-king-palestine-israel.html>
- 2 <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/resources-ideas/cj/classics/1-4-12-civil-rights/conversation-with-martin-luther-king.pdf>
- 3 <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/policy-statements/palestine/>
- 4 https://www.crmvet.org/docs/sv/6707_sncc_news-r.pdf
- 5 <https://canarymission.org/campaign/houston>
- 6 <https://www.foxnews.com/us/columbia-professor-under-fire-for-blaming-israel-for-every-problem-in-the-world>
- 7 <https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/israel-and-harlem-baptists-celebrate-kings-legacy/>
- 8 <https://www.jta.org/1975/04/28/archive/randolph-initiates-committee-of-black-americans-to-support-israel>
- 9 <https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/77re/77resolution.pdf>
- 10 <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/08/30/archives/to-blacks-condemn-plo-terrorism.html>
- 11 <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/martin-luther-king-on-anti-zionism>



An Israeli flag parade in the streets of Jerusalem on Jerusalem Day, 2010.

Photo: Avi Ohayon/IGPO