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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Multifaith Voices for Civil Rights:

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

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Abstract

This project helps students understand religious voices in the African-American Civil Rights Movement, through close readings of excerpts from major writings/speeches by two leading Christian and Jewish civil rights leaders, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Through an engagement with King's essay "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and Heschel's speech "Religion and Race," students will learn how individuals from different faith backgrounds spoke to the problems America faced as it struggled to bring forth equality and freedom, and how these diverse perspectives can lead to multifaith coalition building.

Class Time: Two Periods

Key Skills: Reading comprehension, textual analysis, vocabulary attainment, writing

Day 1:

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 1963

Background (Read in Class):

The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is an open letter written on April 16, 1963, by Martin Luther King Jr. King argues that people have a moral responsibility to break unjust laws and to take direct action rather than waiting potentially for justice to come through the courts. Responding to being referred to as an "outsider," King writes: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." The letter was written in response to "A Call for Unity" by White Christian pastors during the 1963 Birmingham campaign. It was widely published, and became an important text for the civil rights movement in the United States. The letter has been described as "one of the most important historical documents penned by a modern political prisoner", and is considered a classic document of civil disobedience.

Context of MLK:

Students read out loud the following sections of [this National Geographic website](#) to gain a better understanding of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

- Brave Sacrifices
- Inspiring Others
- Speaking Out
- A Win for Peace

Close Reading of Excerpts

Speech

While **confined** here in the **Birmingham** city jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for **constructive** work. But since I feel that you are men of

Questions

Are any words or phrases confusing?
Why is he responding to their criticism?
How does he feel about the men that he is writing to?

<p>genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.</p>	<p>Vocabulary:</p> <p>Confined-restricted</p> <p>Constructive-useful purpose</p> <p>Birmingham-a city in Alabama that saw a lot of protests regarding civil rights issues</p>
<p>Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown.</p>	<p>Are any words or phrases confusing?</p> <p>Why is he in Birmingham?</p> <p>How is religion used in this part of his speech?</p> <p>Vocabulary:</p> <p>Prophets-an inspired teacher of God</p> <p>hamlet-small settlement</p> <p>Apostle Paul-Christian who spread the teachings of Jesus</p> <p>Greco-Roman-the peoples and countries whose culture were extensively and closely influenced by the language, traditions, government and beliefs of the ancient Greeks and Romans.</p>
<p>You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. I am sure that each of you would want to go beyond the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.</p>	<p>Are any words or phrases confusing?</p> <p>Why are they demonstrating?</p> <p>Vocabulary:</p> <p>Deplore-disapproval</p> <p>Emphatic-expressing something forcibly</p>

<p>We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never."..... We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights.</p>	<p>Are any words or phrases confusing?</p> <p>Why does King feel waiting no longer an option?</p> <p>How is religion part of the speech?</p> <p>Vocabulary:</p> <p>Voluntarily-of one's free will</p> <p>Oppressor-group that oppresses people</p>
<p>I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night</p>	<p>Are any words or phrases confusing?</p> <p>Minute 2:54 Play on YouTube so the students can hear the words. Link to Video</p> <p>How are children presented in this part of the speech?</p> <p>How is good and evil presented in this passage?</p> <p>Vocabulary-</p> <p>Whim-sudden desire</p> <p>Vicious-cruel & violent</p> <p>Impunity-exempt from punishment</p> <p>Inferiority-the condition of being lower</p> <p>agonizing-causing pain</p>

<p>in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored";</p>	
<p>We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson scratched across the pages of history the majestic word of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries our foreparents labored here without wages; they made cotton king; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation -- and yet out of a bottomless vitality our people continue to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.</p>	<p>Are any words or phrases confusing?</p> <p>How are the demands of Martin Luther King Jr tied to religion?</p> <p>Vocabulary:</p> <p>scorned-express contempt</p> <p>destiny-fate</p> <p>Vitality-lively</p>

Day 2: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Background (Read in Class)

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

Context of Speech

Heschel places the struggle for African American civil rights in a biblical context, comparing it to the ancient Israelites' Exodus from Egypt. His basic argument is a familiar one today: Human beings are part of a single family, created in the image of God. Anything less than the full equality of all people is an **abrogation** (denial or repeal) of God's will and a travesty to God's very being on Earth.

Close Reading of Excerpts

Speech	Questions
<p>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.</p>	<p>How is racism characterized in terms of religion?</p> <p>Vocabulary insidious-deceitful</p>
<p>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 <i>eye disease, a cancer of the soul</i>.</p>	<p>How is the Bible used in this passage?</p> <p>Vocabulary: Genesis-First book in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament proclaims-announce officially</p>
<p>The plight of the Negro must become our most important concern. Seen in the light of our religious tradition, <i>the Negro problem is God's gift to America</i>, 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.</p>	<p>How is racism a gift from God?</p> <p>Vocabulary: plight -a dangerous situation</p>

<p>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.</p>	<p>What does the speaker say about offending the Negro?</p> <p>Vocabulary:</p> <p>Tenet-principle or belief</p>
<p>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!</p>	<p>How is justice associated with God?</p> <p>Vocabulary</p> <p>Prophets-an inspired teacher of God</p> <p>Omnipotence-the quality of having unlimited power</p>

Comparative Analysis and Reflection

	King	Heschel
Religious Tradition		
Main Idea in Speech	Martin Luther King’s main idea was....	Abraham Joshua Heschel’s main idea was...
Common Ideas about Discrimination		
Common Values for Change		
Key differences		

What would I say about Civil Rights? And what Civil Rights events are happening today that you feel strongly about?