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“I’m Still Arguing With My Mother”

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To commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, Queens College alumnus Mark Levy penned a personal account of the historical events surrounding the topic. The following narration is a reflection of Mark Levy’s personal experiences, the occurrences that surrounded his actions and the actions of others during that time, as well as his individual beliefs and opinions. The contents of the piece do not necessarily reflect the thoughts or beliefs of the Jewish Studies Department, the Center for Jewish Studies, or the staff of the Queens College Journal of Jewish Studies.

“*Tikkum Olam*” was a new term for me when I first came across it a few years ago, but it was not a new concept. When I was active in student government at Queens College in the early ‘60s, organizing a busload of QC students in August of 1963 to go to the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” volunteering for Mississippi for Freedom Summer in 1964, teaching eighth grade in Harlem and then

teaching in the QC SEEK program, and later choosing to create a second career in the labor movement helping working people organize so they could improve their lives – all those life activities seemed consistent with the mandate of “healing the world” and making it a better place for all.

I was raised in a liberal, Jewish home in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s – and was Bar-Mitzvahed in Manhattan in June of 1952. I write this essay as I approach my 75th birthday – not as a way to look backward, but as a way to engage with young people as they think forward about their values and life choices.

AT HOME

The Holocaust in Europe and anti-Semitism in the United States were mentioned and discussed regularly in my home when I was growing up. It was part of the family culture. Discrimination was dangerous and a bad thing, everyone agreed. However, there came a significant division after that point – and a source of arguments and conflicting choices.

My mother and some others in the family said that the important thing was to fight discrimination and defamation against Jews, and just against Jews: “We need to protect our own. If we don’t join our own organizations, give them money to fight for ourselves, nobody will.”

My father, and several others on his side of the family, disagreed. He said that it was not only moral and just but “practical” to oppose all kinds of discrimination, violence, and bullying against everyone. The ethical argument was simple: “An injustice against one is wrong -- and a crime against all.” The strategic argument asked: “Didn’t Hitler attack Gypsies, homosexuals, Catholics, trade unionists, and socialists – and then also Jews?” They pointed out: “If ‘they’ can discriminate against one without objection or resistance, then we could be next.” I sided with those in my family with this broader view.

Opposing discrimination against anyone because of their religion or race or where they came from seemed the right thing to do – especially in the context of the US in the Jim Crow, conservative, and McCarthyite 1950s. I remember reading signs that said “No Irish ...,” or “No Colored ...,” or “No Jews ...” “... need apply” -- and thought of them as all saying the same thing. Part of my sense of myself as Jewish, therefore, was to be part of a tradition of standing up against discrimination.

AT COLLEGE

I told my father how inspired and proud I was to see many Jewish students among those volunteering to go to Prince Edward County in Virginia in the summer of 1963 to assist that community’s struggles around school desegregation. And when the students returned to campus in the fall, they continued their civil rights work, providing leadership for educational and recruiting activities during April ‘64’s “Freedom Week,” protesting discriminatory job hiring in the construction trades in Queens, and later, in early July, organizing the “Freedom Fast” to garner federal support for all the

civil rights workers in Mississippi.

I was pleased to see, in August of 1963, how many Jewish congregations from New York and Long Island sent buses and trainloads of demonstrators to join the historic, huge, and very inclusive March on Washington -- and how many students at QC boarded our Student Association/QC Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)-sponsored bus. That March was a high point in black-Jewish cooperation.

With the example of my friends' activities glowing in my mind, I said "Yes" when a former Queens College student newspaper editor, Dorothy Zellner, invited me and my wife Betty to volunteer to help in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. One of the things I did before going to Mississippi was to ask my old synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side for support and donations for the voter registration campaign led by the civil rights group Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The synagogue gave its blessings (and contributions) eagerly. A few weeks later, when I arrived in June at orientation at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, I was happy that many of the other young men and women volunteering to go South for the summer were Jewish. It, too, was a confirmation of my father's broad view about confronting discrimination -- which I believed was a core Jewish value.

IN MISSISSIPPI

Thousands of us from all around the country had been accepted to work for the summer project -- students, clergy, musicians, medical workers, lawyers, teachers, actors, researchers. We would spread out all over the state, live in local black people's homes, and work under the direction of local leaders and experienced activists from SNCC, CORE, and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

Local black Mississippians had been organizing and struggling against injustice and brutality for years. Betty and I were asked to teach in a Freedom School and also to assist in voting rights projects. We decided to work in the Meridian area with CORE project directors Rita and Mickey Schwerner.

Soon after volunteers started heading south, three Mississippi civil rights workers were murdered. Two were white and Jewish and from NYC (both with connections to Queens College); one was black and Catholic from Meridian. The disappearance of Mickey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney made the headlines all around the world -- and turned the national spotlight on the brutal and unjust conditions in Mississippi. That brought into sharp focus the reality of what Mississippi was like. The vast majority of us decided not to be frightened off -- and "to keep on keeping on."

We quickly saw that the students at the Freedom School were terrific -- brave, eager, creative, smart -- and with wisdom and strengths that came from surviving and challenging an oppressive system. The adults we met had skills honed in the black churches and local black organizations, along with the commitment and determination needed to make change happen. We, the volunteers in the Freedom Schools, came with skills, energy, and nation-wide media and political connections. We were learning as much or more than we were teaching.

In early July 1964, a week or so after we arrived, my wife and I went to the synagogue in Meridian, Mississippi, to attend Sabbath services. We did not go to make a speech; we did not go to hand out flyers; we just went to sit quietly in the back and by our presence make human-to-human, Jew-to-Jew contact. Somehow, they knew we were coming. Before I could put my foot on the first step on the stairs outside, a representative of the synagogue came out and yelled at us: "Go away. You are not wanted here. We are Southerners first!"

What did that mean, "Southerners first?" Whether motivated by fear or racism, it meant that this congregation of Mississippi Jews supported segregation and the "Southern way of life" - even on the Sabbath. Didn't they, as Jews, think that blacks should be allowed to vote - and that denying voting rights to one group also endangered their own rights? Apparently not. Needless to say, this shocked me. My understanding that the core values of Jewish teaching about social justice and opposition to discrimination were actually shared by all Jews was shaken. I couldn't, as they say, even get my foot in that door.

(On a recent visit back to Meridian after about 40 years, I tried to meet and talk with those who turned me away in 1964. I was still refused even a modicum of conversation.)

The culmination of the summer's activities was when the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), with great hopes, headed north in August to Atlantic City for the Democratic Party's National Presidential Nominating Convention. The MFDP was petitioning the Credentials Committee to seat them instead of the segregationist state delegation. Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey started twisting arms and peeling away support for their challenge. Disappointedly, previously supportive liberal, national Jewish organizations and labor unions were among the early ones to switch sides. Again, my experiences contradicted my (and my father's) belief in broad Jewish support for fighting racial discrimination.

AS A TEACHER

Several months later, in the fall of 1964, I went back to my congregation in NYC and offered to report to them about my time in Mississippi, which they had supported. But to my great surprise, I was told that they now saw the civil rights movement as anti-Semitic and anti-Israel because, they explained, some black activists had accused Israel of sending military arms to the apartheid government of South Africa -i.e., in violation of international boycott agreements. I was not invited to tell about the Southern voting rights struggles and movement that they had supported just a few months before.

In my opinion, the nail driven into the crumbling black-Jewish civil rights alliance came in New York City a few years later with the divisive strike by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) against the community school efforts in Ocean Hill - Brownsville. The union screamed "anti-Semitism" as its defense against the black community's complaints of inadequate schooling. I was Jewish, a teacher, and a union member at the time, and still committed to the civil rights movement. In the choice thrust on me, I thought my union was wrong, even racist, in the positions it took.

The teachers' union strike over Ocean Hill -- Brownsville is still an open sore and a point of contention for those who lived through it.

In Mississippi, I had been called a "Jewish, race-mixing, communist agitator and invader." In New York, I was called a "self-hating anti-Semite and scab." I wanted to think that we had a religious tradition that incorporated a commitment to social justice, but I learned that, like all groups, not all Jews think the same way or share the same values.

BACK IN QUEENS, 50 YEARS LATER

Flash forward to Queens College in 2014 and the 50th anniversary of Mississippi Freedom Summer '64. A few years ago, I donated my materials and memorabilia from that time and helped start the Queens College Civil Rights Movement Archive because I felt the story of the era to be an important narrative to be remembered at QC. I persuaded a significant number of other 1960s QC activists to donate their materials to the Archive -- and guess what? Almost all of those donors were Jewish.

Most of us who donated materials would agree that the Movement we participated in made some improvements in the US. While the "white" and "colored" signs have come down since the 1960s and opportunities may have opened up for some, I regularly see that economic disparities are growing and that racial and ethnic discrimination still exist -- in sometimes subtle and sometimes overt ways -- on both personal and institutional levels.

Those who lost privilege and property after the 13th Amendment abolished chattel slavery soon regrouped and fought to end federal Reconstruction and regain power and control using vagrancy and debtor laws, terror, and political manipulation. Similarly, we now see the 20th century creation of a New Jim Crow after federal Civil Rights and Voting Acts moved to end the Old Jim Crow by imposing harsh drug laws, and using differential enforcement, racial profiling, mass incarceration, and a new series of voter suppression tricks to undo the gains of the 1960s. I remain amazed how basic democratic rights like voting cannot be taken for granted, even now, and how voting gains that were made back in the 1960s are being stripped away by the US Supreme Court and undermined by local state legislatures with Voter ID laws, district line gerrymandering, and the like.

Far too many American students willingly accept the syllogism "Rosa Parks sat down; Martin Luther King marched; Barack Obama ran and became president -- everything's OK." Racism and discrimination, they believe, have ended in the US. My mother might even have agreed. Our Movement work is not over.

As a small contribution in contesting those ideas and trying to pass the baton, I've given many presentations these last few years to QC classes as well as to NY/NJ high school classes and to groups of visiting students from England and Ireland. I was greatly inspired to keep telling the story by the mandate in the slim book by historian and activist Vincent Harding: *Hope and History -- Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement*.

As if explaining to my mother, I describe the mammoth mistreatment I saw as well as the tremendous strengths the black community possessed. I talk about how extraordinarily brave the local people were in building their Movement and inviting volunteers to come help in 1964. I talk about how my wife and I were nowhere nearly as

brave. We could go home at any point, but the black family, Mr. and Mrs. Turner, whose house we stayed in, endangered their home, jobs and family and risked far more than we ever did because the police, White Citizens Council, and Ku Klux Klan (KKK) knew they sheltered a white couple all that summer. I describe how Mrs. Polly Heidelberg organized a secret committee of local women to make food every day for her to later deliver to our Freedom School. I talk about how high school seniors, Roscoe Jones of Meridian and Joyce Brown of McComb, had the vision and hopefulness to try to build a state-wide high school student organization.

For the students I talk to, I especially like to emphasize the important role that ordinary, college-aged, young people – in the South and from Queens College – played in that Movement. I'm often asked to look back and evaluate my experience. I say that I feel proud to have decided to do the "right thing" and fortunate to have been a small part of that significant piece of history. I grew to see that Mississippi may have been the worst, but was not the only state that allowed racial discrimination. It was an "example", not an "exception" – as Marshall Ganz regularly reminds us.

I also point out how my personal liberal Jewish upbringing shaped my values and world outlook and led my saying "Yes" when asked to go to Mississippi to work on voter registration and teach in the freedom school. I like to end all those presentations with: "We made some progress, but didn't finish the job – and those gains we made are under attack. Now it's your turn!"

As an alumna who wanted to broaden opportunities for those discussions, I asked Queens College President Muyskens in early 2013 to support a year-long series of commemorative and educational events on campus about the various civil rights 50th anniversaries in 2014 and their relevance to social issues today. Over the year, we've shown movies, had outside speakers, had two theatrical and musical performances, held poetry and essay readings, held a conference on school materials and approaches for teaching about the civil rights movement, provided guest speakers for classes, had articles appear in the student newspaper *The Knight News*, had displays and training sessions about original civil rights materials in the QC Archive, shown civil rights videos on campus TV screens for months, as well as engaged in other outreach and activities.

To their credit, the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) and BALA (Business and Liberal Arts) programs have been among the most supportive of the anniversary commemorations. When faculty in those programs brought the two 1960s themes -- the civil rights movement in the US and the student movement at QC -- to their students, they got enthusiastic responses. Many students, including a range of very diverse, recent immigrants, responded well to their teachers and quickly made the connections between discrimination then and social issues of today such as police profiling and economic disparities. Residential red-lining and restrictive covenants in housing deeds and their modern legacies were things they could understand. SEEK and BALA faculty and instructors from a few other departments used the telling of faculty, guest, and student "personal narratives," incorporated related readings and videos in classes, and assigned the use of the QC Archives. Questions, discussion, and new understandings and awareness followed those activities.

The Center for Jewish Studies and Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding (CERRU) very visibly supported a couple of these efforts and co-sponsored several events. The Ruth and Sidney Schindler Memorial Lecture, endowed by the Schindler and Stolar Families, Lillian Taynor and Family, and Arthur and Carole Anderman funds generously supported a staged reading of the civil rights play *Freedom High* by the professional playwright Adam Kraar, who is Jewish. A number of older Queens residents responded to advertisements and newsletter invitations and attended and enjoyed the Sunday afternoon performance.

LIVING THE COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP

So, what did I find was the support or even interest in the Civil Rights Anniversary Initiative from undergraduates at Queens College? – unfortunately very little empathy in general.

At every event, I hoped to see some young Jewish student who would stand and make the connection about the social justice values of my father that I grew up with, speak proudly of the role of activist Jews in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and express solidarity with the unresolved issues of discrimination that continue today. This was not the case.

For a brief moment, it looked like the Student Association leadership might be interested in recognizing the civil rights contributions of the murdered Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner as symbolized in the Queens College Library Clock Tower, but it seemed that they were preoccupied with other campus activities. When I was invited by faculty to speak to individual classes, there was often enthusiastic involvement by East Asian, sub-continent South Asian, South and Central American and African immigrant students at QC in classes. However, I was repeatedly disappointed that Jewish students seemed to see no connection between their understanding of the Holocaust and the history of US slavery and racial discrimination. I was pleasantly surprised during the last week of the semester when two orthodox male students approached me after one class and thanked me for my presentation – but then went on to explain that they had a hard time talking about issues of race and discrimination with their fellows.

I was naïve to hold the idea from my Jewish upbringing that in our Jewish culture and beliefs that there is some automatic and shared commitment to social justice and an intuitive sense of outrage around all forms of hate-filled discrimination. Yet, I do expect fellow Jews to sympathetically understand and broadly oppose discrimination, as my father argued. Has my mother's narrow argument of "above all, take care of yourself, and your family, protect your own" won out with this generation?

I know that not everyone thinks the same. Even in my generation, not all of us rushed to Washington DC, or to Mississippi, or to Selma – or even fought segregation and discrimination nearby in Rosedale, Queens, or in Levittown, Long Island, or at the opening of the Flushing World's Fair which was built using exclusionist, all-white, construction workers.

As the Editors of *Jewish Currents* (Spring–Summer 2014) succinctly point out: "While the black-Jewish relationship was never uncomplicated, there was a political bond between the two peoples in their quest for equal opportunity and an end to hateful discrimination and exclusion. This bond, and the social progress it achieved, helped

cultivate an abiding progressive sensibility among Jews that has withstood challenges from the right for more than half a century.” They end their editorial with the hope for a “chance to have our anti-racist Jewish sensibility renewed -- and the black-Jewish alliance repaired and revitalized.” (P.3)

STILL HOPING

So, if you have read this far in this article – maybe it’s your turn to pick up the torch. I won’t be around for the next 50th Anniversary of Freedom Summer, but you might.

My father’s gentle teachings of a liberal Jewish tradition committed to building social justice -- broadly fighting discrimination against anyone and working with multiracial and multi-ethnic coalitions to make a better world for all -- was marvelous and just. That history of Jewish commitment should not be merely remembered or commemorated during this civil rights Anniversary year; it should be embraced and carried forward. I look back proudly -- and with thanks -- to those ordinary people who were doing extraordinary things in the 1960s, who taught me so much, and who worked together to make this a better world for all.

I will keep contesting my mother’s narrow, self-centered, and shortsighted philosophy of opposing only anti-Semitism. As Jews, I truly believe that we do have a tradition and mandate to heal the world and fight alongside others who are also discriminated against. If they were around today, what would my father be saying? What would my mother be saying? I know for myself I am still saying: “The struggle continues” – and probably still arguing with my mother.

I hope the story of what some Jewish students at Queens College contributed during the 1960s to the civil rights movement can serve as an inspiration – or at least a challenge. I gladly know that contemporary QC NYPIRG (New York Public Interest Group) and CERRU, as well as organizations like JFREJ (Jews for Economic Justice) and Bend the Arc have young Jewish female and male activists committed to the fight for social justice.

Hopefully some of you (and with the friends you bring along) will take the broad and powerful concept of Tikkum Olam seriously, consider it a core Jewish value, and continue the struggle to make the US a fairer, more just, more democratic, and better place for all.

SEE ALSO:

1. Mark Levy Collection with original documents and photos in QC Rosenthal Library (Special Collections) Civil Rights Archive. [See: Mark Levy Collection, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Queens College, City University of New York. <http://archives.qc.cuny.edu/civilrights/collections/show/1>.
2. “A Monumental Dissent” in Finding Freedom: Memorializing the Voices of Freedom Summer edited by Jacqueline Johnson. Miami University Press, OH. 2013.
3. “What do the [QC] Clock Tower and President Obama’s Talk Have in Common?” Op-Ed in the Queens College The Knight News, February 25, 2014, P. 8.
4. Spring-Summer 2014, Jewish Currents – Special Section: “Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964: Fifty Years Later -- The Old Jim Crow, the New Jim Crow” Pp. 5-32 Multiple Photographs and essay “Voices of the Volunteers: Mark Levy.” (See also: “Editorial – Black Liberation and Jewish Identity” Pp. 1, 3.)
5. Selected 1964 digital photographs by Mark Levy in a PicasaWeb Album: <https://picasaweb.google.com/QCCRMVETS/MeridianMissFreedomSummer1964PixByMarkLevyAndDonnaGarde?authkey=Gv1sRgCNTkzLeen7GcfQ#>. Photos and student interview of ML on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkPBIV_6HmY

MARK LEVY did his undergraduate and graduate work at Queens College/CUNY where he also served as Student Association president for 1962-63. During Mississippi Freedom Summer 1964, he was the coordinator of the Meridian Freedom School. After he returned to his home in New York City, he taught social studies, first in Harlem and then at Queens College in its SEEK Program. He then went into the labor movement as a union organizer and administrator in the electrical manufacturing and healthcare industries. After retiring from the labor movement, he helped start the QC Civil Rights Archive and teaches, writes, and assists with civil rights movement archives and educational projects. He enjoys linking the social issues of the 1960s with those of today through presentations and discussions with students on the secondary and college levels in NY and NJ, OH and WI, MS, and even the UK and IRE.
