

## THE MARCH ON MONTGOMERY

Rabbi Jacob Pressman

*Thirty-six years ago, at this writing. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wired an urgent request to clergy around the country to join him in the Victory Day march on Montgomery, the Alabama state capital. It was to celebrate the successful march from Selma where once he was driven back by state troopers, fire hoses and attack dogs.*

*I had shared the pulpit with Dr. King in South Central Los Angeles some time before, and that, perhaps, is why he followed up the wire with a phone call. I went and marched. The sights and sounds and emotions of that day were such that I felt compelled to share them with the congregation on the Sabbath eve immediately following my return.*

**MARCH 25, 1965**

Dear Friends:

I have just returned from a brief but extremely vital visit to a foreign country, the capital city of the sovereign State of Alabama; a city whose state capitol flies two flags, the flag of the State of Alabama and the flag of the Confederacy, but not the flag of the United States. I have just returned from the place where Jefferson Davis was sworn in as President of the Confederacy and where, over one hundred years later they still refuse to acknowledge the fact that they lost the war. And if they cannot fight the United States of America, they fight the 34 percent of the population who are descendants of their slaves. I shall try not to repeat the things that you have seen and heard but rather share with you my own vivid impressions.

The first impression was that of deciding to go. Almost everyone said "Don't go! Why you?" And I answered "Why not I? Who is supposed to go? Why is it wonderful for the next man to go, and wrong for me?" There was no good answer, so I went. My next impression was of departure. Arriving an hour before plane time on Wednesday night I found the 293 men and women who were going. I found dozens of people who were trying to get reservations but couldn't. I found 700 relatives and friends and swarms of photographers and newspaper men jammed into the tiny Burbank air terminal, a space about as large as our temple lobby.

A man from KHJ radio stuck a microphone under my nose and asked, "Rabbi, why are you going?" I answered, and I think in all honesty, "Well, I missed the crossing of the Red Sea. I missed the Boston Tea Party. I was not with the Freedom Riders on the segregated buses. So when Dr. Martin Luther King issued a call to join him on the Victory Day march in Montgomery, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to miss that."

In the crowd, I met my rabbinical colleagues: 13 Conservative rabbis and two Reform rabbis. We stood at the gate together. The dozens of clergymen and the one Catholic nun who were there began to sing Christian religious hymns.

When they paused we looked at one another and spontaneously we broke into singing "*Hinay mah tov u-mah nayim shevet achim gam yachad*" "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is when brethren can dwell together!" Then we shifted to *Hava Nagilla*. With pleased smiles the people around us began to pick up the Hebrew words. We repeated them over and over again and they sang them with us. In the chilly, narrow boarding area against the chain-link fence, in that airport, a convivial religious spirit was born and it grew and it did not leave us for the next 40 hours.

The plane was delayed and delayed, and a rumor flew through the crowd, "They think there is a bomb on board!" With that in mind, we eventually boarded the plane and took our seats, weary and drenched in perspiration. Once the plane was airborne,

the stewards passed around hot coffee in paper mugs. We had hardly tasted it when the plane took a sudden sustained drop. The coffee flew up to the ceilings, and there was a bit of a panic. I was seated next to the popular singer, Nancy Wilson, who didn't bat a false eyelash, but went on sipping what was left of her coffee.

When the plane touched down in Montgomery, it was 2:45 A.M. our time, 4:45 A.M. their time. We had not yet slept. We entered the air terminal loaded with food, luggage, heavy coats and boots because we had been told it was going to be cold and rainy. We found it hot and humid. We also found no lockers, no check room and no official of the terminal to tell us anything. There were only two Montgomery policemen, who refused to answer any questions, not even "Where is the restroom?"

As 43 plane loads swelled our ranks, we awaited the dawn. An Episcopal minister from the North handed out mimeographed instructions which concluded ominously that at the program's end, "All participants are urged to disperse with as much efficiency and speed as possible. Stragglers must not remain in the city." That was not very encouraging.

We bought a copy of the morning newspaper and we read some of the letters to the editor. I quote: "In this gathering of paid professional agitators, pinkos, left-wingers, liberals, beatniks, imitation ministers and brain-washed students, the state of Alabama has, within her boundary, the greatest collection of hypocrites ever assembled. Of course, these are being led by the greatest imitation minister of them all. Dr. Martin Luther King."

Then it went on to add, "I think the above clearly describes the motley gang gathered in Alabama to follow a Judas-goat from Selma to Montgomery." And so on and on and on.

Thus "encouraged," our rabbis jumped over the fence to the landing field, the grassy area, put on tallis and tefillin and *davvened* Shacharit with greater fervor, I am sure, and sincerity than ever. Our Christian brethren watched us with warm interest and they began to take pictures, and I suspect that they will be back home this weekend telling their congregations of their experiences, and how they saw this marvelous group of Jewish ministers saying their morning prayers, and why didn't they have such a thing?

Wondering what to do with our luggage and reluctant to carry suitcases and packages and bags of food on the long, long march, four of us got the idea of going by cab to the local synagogue. We found that there was no rabbi. We entered through a door which was left accidentally open overnight, which convinced us that there was no rabbi there.

Soon the cantor arrived. He was on his way to a morning minyan. But, like the officers at the terminal, he answered no questions.

I thought it might be a good idea to stand on the steps of the capital and sound the shofar blast, the traditional ram's horn call to freedom, so I asked the cantor to lend me a shofar. He didn't know of any.

A little discouraged we left our luggage and we went by cab to the so-called City of St. Jude, a large Catholic hospital complex, whose campus was turned into a muddy quagmire by tens of thousands of feet and hundreds of army trucks and jeeps. We felt very much as if we were going into an army camp.

Four thousand people had gathered through the night, and they were just getting up when we got there a little after seven o'clock in the morning. Everywhere there were groups singing and rallying. I met rabbis from all over the country, ministers and priests from everywhere in full ministerial garb spattered with brown mud. I bumped into Dean Sayre, the minister of the National Cathedral in Washington, where the

President prays.

Introductions were unnecessary. Every man was every other man's brother. It rained. Nobody noticed it. It stopped. The sun came out, and the ground steamed. Nobody noticed it.

We stood there until 11:05. We were supposed to leave earlier but we heard over the walkie-talkie from the gate leading out of St. Jude's that there were police at the exit who told the head of the line that they could not make a right turn. It was against the law, which meant we couldn't leave the complex.

And then, too, subpoenas were served upon Dr. King and that further delayed us. So it was 11:05 in the morning when the first marchers left. Dr. King, Dr. Ralph Bunche, James Baldwin, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and a host of others led the line. It was 11:40 when we got to the gate. We were the California delegation, marching behind a California flag held by an Episcopalian minister, loaned by a state senator.

Now for some more impressions: As we marched through the gates of St. Jude's Hospital and out onto the dirt road of the Negro shantytown I had a feeling of leaving safety and getting ready to run a gauntlet. We were instructed to march six abreast. In another ominous instruction we were told that the men should march on the outside of the line and put the women on the inside.

Negro Shantytown was unbelievable — unpainted wooden shacks, three or four generations of Negroes sitting and standing, waving, clapping, singing and blowing kisses, warm smiles from toothless babies to toothless elders.

We felt embraced by humanity, by the marchers all around us, the people in the houses, by the songs that we were singing. Marshaling the lines and keeping us from breaking any city ordinances were the workers. These workers were not what the "Letter to the Editor" described but were mostly ministers, white men in ministerial garb, many with their jackets off and their white sleeves and their white turned collars contrasting proudly with their black vests, running up and back, chanting directions, perspiring, soaking in the rain, smiling.

As we walked along every so often a man stood and held up a little card. It was printed by a Jewish philanthropist out of the middle West, a man who had done a great many wonderful things in this world, a man who had the foresight to print little signs: "KEEP SMILING!" It was a necessary instruction as we trudged those six miles. And wherever we saw it, we did smile.

At one point we reached a hilltop in the road, and I was able to look back behind me at a solid column of chanting humanity at least a half-mile long. Then I looked down the hill in front of us and again I saw a half-mile of solid humanity, united from everywhere by a common concern for other people, for human decency. I must confess as I stood on that hilltop and saw myself and felt myself surrounded by these decent, caring persons, I burst into tears and never really got my eyes dry for hours afterward. They weren't tears of sorrow. They weren't tears of hatred or frustration, but they were tears of pride in the goodness of which man is capable when he tries.

I met many people in the line. Everybody talked to everybody. To my surprise, I found the widow of Sam Zimbalist at whose funeral I had officiated a few years ago. She lives in Malibu and I asked her what religious group she was with. She said, "None in particular." She had heard about the march, phoned the airport, asked if she could get a reservation and just came along.

A tall, heavy set man with a shock of white hair said "Hello, I'm from Iowa." He didn't even have a jacket. He had lost it. He was in shirt sleeves. He said, "You know what happened? I had heard about this march and I said to my wife 'I'm going to

Montgomery.' She said, 'You're crazy.' And so I came."

A young man I married eight years ago was in the line and this is how he got there: March 25th was his wedding anniversary. He said, "Remember that date, Rabbi?" I didn't. He said, "It is my anniversary so I said to my wife, 'Honey, would you give me a wonderful anniversary present?' She said, 'Anything you want.' So I said, 'I want to go to Alabama.'" And there he was.

Suddenly we entered the white neighborhood. Lining the road were white faces, faces like our own staring at us in utter hatred.

They had been shouting and jeering for over an hour, but by the time we got there they were tired and silent. Our singing also became quieter. We suddenly felt fear. We felt isolation. An image flashed through my mind. I suddenly imagined, as we ran a few hundred yards to close ranks, that we were a column of prisoners running toward a Nazi concentration camp under the cold eyes of hostile citizens.

This feeling passed again as we entered a Negro section past the shopping district. The Negroes ran out to us with bottles of Coke and ice water and pop and towels for our perspiring faces. Little children ran out to shake hands and somebody made a V for victory sign, and it caught on. From then on, everyone communicated back and forth to the sidewalks with a V for victory sign and the singing revived.

Another impression: The last half mile to the Capitol steps is a broad beautiful avenue between tall buildings at the windows of which and on the pavements of which stood well-dressed white people, screaming at us. You will forgive me if I quote. They called out to us, "N—s! Bastard Californians!" and other things. But I tell you it didn't hurt at all. I pitied them that they should have to feel that way toward us.

Many windows flew the Confederate flag. One had a huge picture of Dr. Martin Luther King, which said, "A picture of Dr. Martin Luther King at a school for Communists." At one hotel's second-story windows we saw four Negroes, probably waiters, in little white mess-jackets. They were leaning out the window and making the V for victory sign and smiling, and we were smiling and waving back to them from the street.

At the very next window, possibly in the very next room and possibly the dining room, stood a silent, very grim group of well-dressed white diners. They seemed to wonder why we were smiling at them until one leaned out and saw the hand of the Negro waiter in the next window waving at us. We turned to one another and said, "There goes that job."

An impression: In front of the Capitol we were urged to sit down in the streets. There was a soldier every two yards along the pavement, a soldier in United States Army uniform with a Confederate flag patch sewed on his chest. We were surrounded on all sides by a sea of humanity five city blocks long and 70 feet wide, which I am confident was well over 50,000 people singing with Harry Belafonte, listening to speaker after speaker.

Dr. Martin Luther King spoke, stirred us to the core, with his refrain of "Let us march until Brotherhood is more than a meaningless word in an opening prayer, but the order of the day on every legislative agenda."

We could actually feel the sound, the sledgehammer blows of crowd reaction as he

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\* Here my father used the actual word, with an apology, no doubt to convey the shocking level of vitriol hurled at the marchers and the character of Southern bigotry. I decided to alter the text so that the use of this one word wouldn't distract anyone from the overall witness of the sermon. (Daniel Pressman)

said of Alabama since the Civil War, describing the real meaning of segregation, "They had segregated Southern money from the poor whites. They had segregated Southern morals from the rich whites. They had segregated Southern churches from Christianity. They had segregated Southern minds from honest thinking. They had segregated the Negro from everything." And then came an unforgettable climax as he recited the Battle Hymn of the Republic as it has never been recited before, and never received before, until the final refrain with that glorious Hebrew word, "Hallelujah." He repeated it and repeated it four times, "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah. Glory, Glory, Hallelujah, His truth is marching on!"

An impression: The excitement died suddenly and apprehension took over. Our mimeographed instructions said that we were to go three blocks northeast to Patterson Field where buses would be waiting to take us back to the airport. We went over to one of the Montgomery Policemen. We said, "Where is Patterson Field?" He shook his head.

We asked the young soldiers in the United States Army uniform. They were the National Guard. "Where is Patterson Field?" They shook their heads. "Which way is northeast?" They shook their heads.

We felt a growing uneasiness as twilight rushed in, hastened by dark clouds. We began to run in one direction and then in another. Nobody would tell us anything, A rumor spread that the State National Guard which had been nationalized would be denationalized in ten minutes and turn from guards to enemies.

We spotted a Negro cab and we took it. We didn't look for any buses, and we raced back to the synagogue for our gear and then down highway 80 to the airport, remembering the warning, "Stragglers must not remain in the city!"

One of our group was in another cab. Suddenly they were given chase by a deputy car, and they were forced slowly off the road, not to the right but to the left. Only by skillful driving on the part of the cabby did they avoid collision with oncoming traffic.

One marcher, as you know, did not make it. Mrs. Viola Gregg Liuzzo was shot and killed as she drove that highway.

Back at the airport, I tried to reach Dr. Martin Luther King and was successful in finding the phone number of the place where he was staying, in absolute secrecy, under heavy guard.

I called him and spoke to him and gave him the good wishes of this community and told him of some financial help which I had along with me. At the end of this incredible day, after having been delayed at the gate, after having marched all those miles, after having spoken and exhausted himself, and after having been turned back from seeing the governor, he was still cordial. He was still warm and friendly: an extremely simple and humble man.

An impression: Utter exhaustion as we awaited our plane for eight long hours, returning home after 42 hours without sleep. Talking it over, one foot-weary rabbi said to me, "You know, it is easier to read history than to be mixed up in the making of it." And that is true.

But I wouldn't have missed it for anything. None of us who went was a hero, and many of us from time to time were afraid of things that might happen. None of us was a hero, but each one of us felt that at least he was, in the fullest sense, a human being. I am glad I went. And as I said, I would not have missed it for anything. And because I was there, you were there. It will get worse before it gets better, but I believe even more now in the goodness of man because I went.

And because I went and saw what I saw and heard what I heard, I believe even more in the goodness of God.