

MLK and Heschel: a deep interfaith friendship

Maureen Fiedler | Jan. 17, 2013 NCR Today

This coming week on Interfaith Voices, we are looking at the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. by examining the power of his interfaith friendship with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Heschel was from Poland; he left in 1938, just in time to escape the Holocaust, though members of his family were caught up in that terrible genocide.

Knowing how Jews had been vilified and persecuted in Europe, he was imbued with a sense of justice, believing that God created all humans equal in dignity. But because of this life experience, he was pleasantly stunned to discover that King, a Christian minister, had made the Exodus theme central to the theology of the civil rights movement. And of course, he loved it and embraced it.

So it was natural for him to join King in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. After the march at Selma, Ala., he is famous for saying, "I felt as if my legs were praying."

The two men also strongly opposed the Vietnam War, and so shared a deep friendship based on shared ideals of both justice and peace.

In fact, they became such good interfaith friends that Heschel invited King and his family to his home to celebrate Passover in 1968, an event that -- sadly -- never took place because of King's assassination.

But Heschel's interfaith friendships went further. They included a litany of many of the great religious leaders of the late 20th century: Dan and Phil Berrigan; Thomas Merton; William Sloane Coffin; Reinhold Niebuhr. Although women were missing from this lineup, Heschel's daughter, Susannah, has carried on the tradition as a professor at Dartmouth College.

If Heschel and King were alive today, I am confident they would be in the forefront of those condemning Islamophobia, promoting interfaith collaboration and speaking out for gender equality and LGBT rights.

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