

“Cowering from hatred and unfair
treatment was rarely an option:”
Jewish and African Canadian Communities
in The Post War II Period

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Images from the American civil rights movement of the 1960s dominate the popular Canadian imagination of civil liberty history. Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy and perhaps Rabbi Abraham Heschel have been seared onto the Canadian psyche.¹ Less well-remembered however, are the efforts of individuals and groups to advance civil rights within our own country. But how is this possible? How is it that a nation has seemingly forgotten such crucial elements of its history? The answer is found in the pervasiveness of the myth of British egalitarianism. Within this understanding, Canada is conceptualized as a bastion of morality wherein individuals irrespective of race, colour or creed are afforded the same opportunities to thrive.² The abolition of slavery, which occurred on August 28, 1833 throughout the British Colonies, and the Underground Railroad which had its terminus in what is now Ontario are the most lauded events.³ The by-product of such an understanding of Canadian history has been an almost intoxicating sense of superiority especially, in relation to the United States of America; often deemed unjust and immoral. Canadian society has invested in this mythology to such an extent that narratives which run counter to it have been left to languish in obscurity. The civil rights or civil liberties movement within Canada in the Post World War II era has long been such a casualty. Academics like Sarah-Jane Mathieu and community activists have begun to engage more thoroughly with that uncomfortable aspect of Canadian rights history. The result has been the chipping away, albeit quite slowly, at the wall of misinformation erected by the myth of egalitarianism. For the Jewish

¹ "America in the 20th Century: The Civil Rights Movement.", directed by Anonymous, produced by Bent Hannigan., Media Rich Learning, 2010. Alexander Street

² McLaren, Kristin. "We had no desire to be set apart: Forced Segregation of Black Students in Canada West Public Schools and Myths of British Egalitarianism." *Social History*. Vol. 37, No. 73, 2004, pp.31

³ McLaren, Kristin. Pg. 49-50, Winks, R. *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, Second Edition. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. pp. 111, 193

and African Canadian communities, a rich history of interaction and cooperation is revealed. Particularly, in the 1950s and 60s Canadian civil rights movement era the solidarity between the communities was readily apparent. Efforts of activists, and religious figures to advance the cause of human dignity and mutually beneficial legislature attest to that connection and overall relationship.

As early as the eighteenth-century members of the Jewish community sought to make what is now known as Canada home.⁴ Initially the city of Montreal was where the burgeoning community began to establish itself.⁵ The population of Jews at this point was small only amounting to about a dozen families in the 1770s.⁶ With the increase in immigration originating predominately from England and Eastern Europe the population began to rise. Such growth within the nineteenth century provided the impetus for the establishment of Jewish communities which were smaller in the cities of Hamilton, Kingston and Toronto.⁷ Weinfeld, Schnoor and Koffman in their article “Overview of Canadian Jewry” indicate that by the 1870s the total Jewish population was more than 1000.⁸ In the following century Canadian Jewry would witness a more significant increase, 52,000 Jews hailing from Russia, Poland and Romania came in the hopes of building a future.⁹ The majority chose to settle in the major cities.¹⁰ In 1919 and 1922 the community established such core organizations as the Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services.¹¹ As the Post World War II era rolled around the Jewish

⁴ Morton Weinfeld, Randal Schnoor and David Koffman, “Overview of Canadian Jewry” in A. Dashefsky and I. Sheskin (eds.), American Jewish Year Book. [City]: Springer. 2012, pp.56

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Godfrey and Godfrey. Search Out the Land: The Jews and the Growth of Equality in British Colonial America, 1740-1867. Montreal: MQUP, 1995, pp. 113-114

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Morton Weinfeld, Randal Schnoor and David Koffman, “Overview of Canadian Jewry” in A. Dashefsky and I. Sheskin (eds.), American Jewish Year Book. [City]: Springer. 2012, pp.56

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

population had increased to approximately 204,836 about 1.46% of Canada's total population.¹²

One of the most significant aspects of the Jewish experience was the rampant discrimination



Figure 1, "Gentiles only" sign, 28 January 1940. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 17, series 5-3, file 64, item 1.

which the community had to contend.¹³ Irving Abella asserted in his article "*Presidential Address: Jews, Human Rights, and the Making of a New Canada*" that the "Jew was the pariah of Canadian society, demeaned, denounced and discriminated against".¹⁴ Allan Levine in "*Seeking the Fabled City*" similarly asserts that as the population experienced growth so did antisemitism.¹⁵ Such realities of exclusion and marginalization prevented Jews from enjoying the full benefits of citizenship. Often viewed as a group who was outside the idealized Canadian view and unassimilable a host of pursuits were restricted.¹⁶ A 1938 study conducted by the

Canadian Jewish Congress for instance found that no Jews were principals and only a small amount were even teachers.¹⁷ Discrimination in employment extended further, preventing Jews from being salespeople in department stores, working in banks, insurance companies and even attaining certain government postings.¹⁸ Accompanying the employment restrictions was the

¹² Morton Weinfeld, Randal Schnoor and David Koffman, "Overview of Canadian Jewry" in A. Dashefsky and I. Sheskin (eds.), *American Jewish Year Book*. [City]: Springer. 2012, pp. 60

¹³ Lakeshore Boulevard, 1938. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 17, series 5-3, file 131.

¹⁴ Abella, Irving. "Jews, Human Rights and the Making of a New Canada." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 11 (2000): pp. 4

¹⁵ Levine, Allan Gerald. *Seeking the Fabled City: the Canadian Jewish Experience*. Hardcover edition., McClelland & Stewart, 2018. pp.140

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Abella, Irving. "Jews, Human Rights and the Making of a New Canada." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 11 (2000): pg. 4. 8

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4

refusal of Jews for entry or accommodation at hotels, beaches, resorts and golf clubs.¹⁹ Before the mid 1940 signs were openly displayed similar to that of the lodge in figure one stating “Gentiles Only” or more plainly “No Jews Wanted”.²⁰ Arguably the most detrimental constraint placed on the community was the limiting of Jews in professions and in institutions of higher learning. McGill, for instance, witnessing an increase in the enrollment of Jewish students in the year prior to 1926, enacted measures to curb Jewish enrollment.²¹ Concerning Jews R.A Mackay Dean of Arts of McGill in 1926 went as far as stating Jews “are of no use to this country”.²² Following suit with McGill other institutions subsequently implemented similar practices.²³ Jews who managed to complete their studies faced the added struggle of securing crucial placements.²⁴ The restrictions which Jews faced sought to limit upward mobility and the access to power which socio-economic mobility ultimately yields. Not to be thwarted however, the Jewish community turned inward and through collective effort pooled resources to establish the structures needed to thrive, despite marginalization by Gentiles elites and institutions.²⁵ By the Post World War II period, despite the horrors of the Holocaust according to Abella, anti-Semitic sentiments did not dwindle in reality they were intensified.²⁶ The Canadian Jewish community in this era however was markedly different from previous decades. The community had increased its organization and began to benefit from prosperity attributed to the Post War

¹⁹ Levine, Allan Gerald. *Seeking the Fabled City : the Canadian Jewish Experience* . Hardcover edition., McClelland & Stewart, 2018. Pg.141-142

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.,142

²² Abella, Irving. “Jews, Human Rights and the Making of a New Canada.” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 11 (2000): pg. 6

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Levine, Allan Gerald. *Seeking the Fabled City : the Canadian Jewish Experience* . Hardcover edition., McClelland & Stewart, 2018. Pg.141-142

²⁵ Ibid.,148-151

²⁶ Abella, Irving. “Jews, Human Rights and the Making of a New Canada.” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 11 (2000): pg. 7

boom.²⁷ Such a reality poised the community to not only fight for change but also to make necessary connections with other marginalized groups. The African Canadian community was one key group who also shared in a long history of exclusion within Canada.

From the seventeenth century a forced migration of people of African heritage to the colonies took place, an occurrence precipitated by the slave trade.²⁸ Men, women and children held in bondage were brought into Canada as a source of unpaid labour.²⁹ In the years following the end of the American Revolution in 1783, approximately 3000 “Black Loyalist” settled in Canada.³⁰ After the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833 the African Canadian population witnessed a significant demographic increase.³¹ In the mid-nineteenth century an estimated 20,000 - 40,000 individuals escaped from slavery in the United States and braved numerous hardships to seek out freedom in what is now Canada.³² Those that came began establishing communities in Colchester, Harrow, Windsor, St Catharines, Amherstburg, Hamilton and Chatham. From the onset, however, their communities were met with exclusion and prejudice.³³ Prominent societal figures such as Edwin Larwill, once a member of the legislature, stated in 1842 “The Negroe is a distant species of the human family... amalgamation is as disgusting to the eye, as it is immoral in its tendencies and all good men will discountenance it.”³⁴ Though many Upper Canadian whites considered slavery was “an evil,” they nonetheless thought social mixing or intermarriage with African Canadians was in the

²⁷ Morton Weinfeld, Randal Schnoor and David Koffman, “Overview of Canadian Jewry” in A. Dashefsky and I. Sheskin (eds.), *American Jewish Year Book*, Springer, 2012, pp. 55-90. [ONLINE], pg 59

²⁸ Black History in Canada, Library and Archives of Canada. Black History in Canada

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Winks, R. *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, Second Edition. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014. Pg. 111

³² McLaren, Kristin. “We had no desire to be set apart: Forced Segregation of Black Students in Canada West Public Schools and Myths of British Egalitarianism”- vol 37, no73 2004, *Social History*. [pg.31](#)

³³ McLaren, Kristin. “We had no desire to be set apart: Forced Segregation of Black Students in Canada West Public Schools and Myths of British Egalitarianism”- vol 37, no73 2004, *Social History*, pp..27

³⁴ Ibid., 32

assessment of historian Kristin McLaren, “erroneous at best.”³⁵ As the twentieth century came into focus, African Canadians continued to suffer under the yoke of de jour segregation.³⁶ Not only were churches, restaurants and entertainment closed to people of African heritage, but jobs were limited predominantly to servile positions.³⁷ By 1941, African Canadians in search of employment ventured into major cities. Thus, the majority of African Canadians came to reside in major cities like Toronto, Montreal, Windsor, Halifax, Winnipeg, and Saint John.³⁸ In 1955, another wave of migration to Canada took place via the domestic scheme. Caribbean women were able come to Canada to work as domestics in Canadian households.³⁹ The Post World War II era found African Canadians ethnically diverse, still small and dispersed across the nation. Nevertheless, it brought with it the desire to redouble efforts to achieve betterment. Such a task however, necessitated the seeking out of partnerships.⁴⁰ Active and vocal members of the Jewish community, especially Rabbis from the Holy Blossom Temple proved to be integral allies.

In 1944, Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, having existed since the middle of the nineteenth century, hired an outspoken and dynamic rabbi by the name of Abraham Feinberg pictured pensively in figure 2.⁴¹ Earlier in the twentieth century, the congregation made the

³⁵ McLaren, Kristin. “We had no desire to be set apart: Forced Segregation of Black Students in Canada West Public Schools and Myths of British Egalitarianism”- vol 37, no73 2004, *Social History*. pp. 32

³⁶ Mathieu, Sarah-Jane. *North of the Color Line Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955*. University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Pg.210

³⁷ *Journey to justice*, Roger McTair, 2000. National Film Board

³⁸ Winks, R. *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, Second Edition. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014. pp. 495

³⁹ *Black History in Canada*, Library and Archives of Canada. *Black History in Canada*

⁴⁰ Winks, R. *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, Second Edition. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014. pp. 467-468

⁴¹ Levine, Allan Gerald. *Seeking the Fabled City : the Canadian Jewish Experience* . Hardcover edition., McClelland & Stewart, 2018. Pg. 49-50, *The Impulsive Crusader of Holy Blossom*, Sangster Dorothy (1950, Oct 1). Macleans.

transition from Orthodox to the most liberal branch of Judaism, Reform.⁴² Within this particular branch of Judaism strong emphasis was placed on ethical responsibilities both personal and



Figure 2. Feinberg, Rabbi Abraham L. collection. P0165. Canadian Jewish Archives, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

social.⁴³ Feinberg in such an environment thrived fighting for what he characterized as “the kingdom of God on Earth”.⁴⁴

From his pulpit he challenged racial prejudice, injustices and spoke for civil rights and liberties. His stance undoubtedly galvanized many in his congregation for through his actions he exemplified reform Judaism’s understanding of the importance of being actors in correcting societal wrongs. Feinberg, for

example, when speaking of the condition of African Canadians

in 1945, then referred to as Negroes stated, “even if one

individual is oppressed by his colour the true spirit of Canadianism cannot endure it”.⁴⁵ In his

pre-New year statement of 1958, Rabbi Feinberg told his congregants that Nazism is kept alive

in ant-negro sentiment.⁴⁶ In his 18 years with the congregation Feinberg grew the congregation

to 1,200 people and was consistent with his message of solidarity.

In 1949, he opened Holy Blossom Temple for visits by other minority groups. Of particular significance was the visit of William Carter, a coloured citizen of Dresden Ontario in the 1950 which was essentially segregated.⁴⁷ After Carter’s visit, Feinberg went to Dresden with the Carter family wherein he was invited to speak in the town’s Baptist Hall.⁴⁸ Although the

⁴² Reform Judaism: The Tenets of Reform Judaism, 1998-2021 American-Israeli Cooperative enterprises

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sangster Dorothy, “The Impulsive Crusader of Holy Blossom,” *Macleans’*. Oct. 1, 1950, p.____.

⁴⁵ Negroes 'forgotten minority' in Canada, rabbi asserts. (1945, Feb 12). *The Globe and Mail* (1936-2016).

⁴⁶ Racism keeps Nazism alive; Feinberg says. (1958, Sep 13). *The Globe and Mail* (1936-2016) Retrieved from

⁴⁷ The Impulsive Crusader of Holy Blossom, Sangster Dorothy (1950, Oct 1). *Macleans, Dresden Story*, Julian Biggs, 1954. National Film Board,

Journey to justice, Roger McTair, 2000. National Film Board,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

words Feinberg spoke are presently unknown his presence is significant because it was a show of solidarity. In the 1950s, Feinberg held a position in the Canadian Jewish Congress and served as the vice president of the Association for Civil Liberties where he actively worked towards the passing of antidiscrimination legislature.⁴⁹ After Feinberg's retirement in the early sixties, Holy Blossom received another passionate and vocal rabbi concerned with advancing the rights of marginalized in Canada.⁵⁰

Rabbi Gunter Plaut came to Holy Blossom in the early 1960s, and under his leadership the community again continued its solidarity efforts with the African Canadian community both in Canada and abroad. In 1962 Martin Luther King Jr came to Holy Blossom and gave a speech



Figure 1 Rabbi G. Plaut. Toronto Telegram Fonds. 1974-002, Box 408. Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

against discrimination.⁵¹ Plaut described this event as having “brought important guests to the pulpit and the community”.⁵²

Shortly before 1965 members in the Holy Blossom Temple founded the Martin Luther King Fund to aid those in the American Civil Rights Movement.⁵³ The Fund garnered immense support and, as

Rabbi Plaut stated “the idea caught on and soon the campaign became nation-wide, far

⁴⁹ Ibid., Letter from the Association of Civil Liberties, 1950. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 17, series 5-4-1, file 14.

⁵⁰ New leader for holy blossom: Feinberg retires after 18 years. (1961, May 13). The Globe and Mail (1936-2016)

⁵¹ Plaut, W. Gunther. *Unfinished Business: An Autobiography*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, Internet archive. Digitized 2014. pp.206

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

beyond the efforts of our own congregation".⁵⁴ Although, the fund was not devised initially to aid the Canadian fight for civil liberties, Milton Cadsby, the then-chairman of the Martin Luther King Fund alluded to the possibility if continued for its use to aid anti-discriminatory efforts within Canada.⁵⁵ In 1965 Harry Belafonte, a popular figure in American entertainment, came to Canada and through his visit the Martin Luther King Fund raised 8,000 dollars. In attendance at the fundraising luncheon was Rabbi Plaut, members from Holy Blossom Temple, representatives from The Canadian Jewish Congress, The Canadian Negro Women's Club, and the Jamaican Canadian Association.⁵⁶ Such actions and interactions further facilitated the connection and alliance between the Jewish and African Canadian communities.

Further interaction and deepening engagements between the Jewish and African Canadian communities regarding this charitable venture seem to have developed between 1963 and 1969.⁵⁷ Stanley Grizzle, a prominent activist figure within the Toronto African Canadian community, played a significant role in this era of Black-Jewish solidarity in Canada, including his sometime role as the chair of the Martin Luther King Fund.⁵⁸ One of the other instances surround the coming of George Wallace, at the time Alabama's pro-segregation governor, to speak at the Lions Club in Toronto in July 1964.⁵⁹ In his memoir, Plaut proudly related the efforts of the Temple's Social Action Committee, the body that organized a picket to protest Wallace's speech. The event also aided in collecting more money for the Martin Luther King

⁵⁴ Ibid., 206-207

⁵⁵ Plaut, W. Gunther. *Unfinished Business: An Autobiography*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys. Internet archive. Digitized 2014. Pp.206, Belafonte helps raise \$8,000 for negroes. (1963, Jun 27). *The Globe and Mail* (1936-2016)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Stanley G. Grizzle fonds (multiple media). Library and Archives of Canada. R12294-0-2-E. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Container 8, File 1-3, 26-27, 3794279, 3794278, 3794276, 3734823, 3734822. Finding Aid

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Will solicit pro-negro funds when Wallace talks to lions. Pg 45. (1964, Jul 08). *Toronto Daily Star* (1900-1971)

Fund.⁶⁰ Holy Blossom Temple members marched alongside both African Canadian and other white, non-Jewish allies.⁶¹ Plaut even penned an open letter to Governor Wallace published on July 8, 1964 challenging the governor's beliefs and indicating that his presence in Canada has more to do with Canadian courtesy and commitment to freedom of speech.⁶² The disapproval that Wallace encountered was because of the beliefs which he espoused. Clearly, the efforts of Rabbi Feinberg and Rabbi Plaut played a significant role in advancing the solidarity between the African Canadian and Jewish communities. Through word and deed, Rabbis emboldened members of their community to act and by so doing increased and illustrated the solidarity between the two marginalized groups.

The final aspect which elucidates the significant alliance between the two communities was the activist activities of the labour movements. Within the Post World War II era in the early



Figure 2 Kalmen Kaplansky at Canadian Regional Zone Leadership Training Conference of the Sleeping Car Porters, American Federation of Labor, June 1950, Box 3609, 3201293. Jewish Labour Committee of Canada / Library and Archives Canada / PA- 139566

1950s African Canadian Labour groups like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters allied themselves with other minority organizations like the very determined and forceful Jewish Labour Committee.⁶³ African Canadians like Arthur R. Blanchette and Stanley Grizzle, both leaders in the Canadian Sleeping Car Porters, engaged with their Jewish counterparts. Sid Blum, who served as the executive secretary of the Joint Labour Committee for Human Rights, and Kalmen

⁶⁰ Plaut, W. Gunther. *Unfinished Business: An Autobiography*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, Internet archive. Digitized 2014. Pg. 207

⁶¹ Plaut, W. Gunther. *Unfinished Business: An Autobiography*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, Internet archive. Digitized 2014. Pg. 207

⁶² W, G. P. (1964, Jul 08). Open letter to governor, Wallace. *The Globe and Mail* (1936-2016)

⁶³ Mathieu, Sarah-Jane. *North of the Color Line Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955*. University of North Carolina Press, 2010. pg. 208-209, 212

Kaplansky, the head of the Jewish Labour Committee, were such key figures.⁶⁴ Together these main groups, along with smaller minorities pushed for the advancement of such human rights victories as the 1951 Ontario Fair Employment Practices Act, and the 1954 The Fair Accommodation Practices Act. After The Fair Accommodation Act was passed, Blum and members of the Black community in Dresden who were still contending with de jour segregation in the town, worked together to test compliance and report issues.⁶⁵ Blum pressured media to supply coverage and lobbied the Minister of Labour with respect to the issue. The town received significant press and after significant pressure the African Canadian community of Dresden began to see some redress, according to Ross Lambertson.⁶⁶ The solidarity expressed in the collective effort of activists aided in not only pushing for the rights but also monitoring when they were not being complied with.

Indeed, the postwar period was one of considerable change. In Canada, like the United States, that change took the form of the fight for civil rights for historically marginalized communities. At the forefront of that fight within Canada was the Jewish and African Canadian communities. Such communities formed a significant alliance and overall solidarity to advance the collective goal. Jewish and African Canadian activists, along with labour leaders and religious figures played an integral role in advancing civil rights which we today consider commonplace.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵Lambertson, Ross. “‘The Dresden Story’: Racism, Human Rights, and the Jewish Labour Committee of Canada.” *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 47, 2001, JSTOR pp.71, 79
, Dresden Story, Julian Biggs, 1954.NationalFilm Board

Journey to justice, Roger McTair, 2000.NationalFilm Board, Lambertson, Ross. “‘The Dresden Story’: Racism, Human Rights, and the Jewish Labour Committee of Canada.” *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 47, 2001, JSTOR pg. 71

⁶⁶ Lambertson, Ross. “‘The Dresden Story’: Racism, Human Rights, and the Jewish Labour Committee of Canada.” *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 47, 2001, JSTOR pg.79



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