

# BONDS OF BROTHERHOOD

*The great American and Negro leader gives an inspiring statement of the common aims of the Negro and Jewish peoples and democracy*

*By Paul Robeson*

**M**Y HEARTFELT greetings to the Jewish people, who are now celebrating three centuries of life and work in this land. It is good for all Americans to be reminded once again that the "Anglo-Saxon" image of America is a false-face. Certainly no Negro can hear the declaration of the Committee for the 300th Anniversary of Jewish Settlement in the U.S.A.—"*We have always been part of America*"—without reflecting that such has been our own insistent claim: "*We too are America!*"

Self-evident since the days of Haym Salomon and Crispus Attucks, these claims have been denied by the racists and reactionaries of every generation; and never before have these foes been more powerful and arrogant than they are today. Not only is race, color and creed a continuing bar to a so-called "100 per cent American" status, but nowadays any person or organization can be officially branded "un-American" by a one-man ruling. The McCarran-Walter immigration act compares in foulness with the worst of Nazi racism.

The significant relationship of the Jewish people's interests with those of the Negro people has been pointed out by the Anniversary Committee:

*"Let us make our anniversary a source of inspiration in the defense of our rights and liberties. . . . Let us act in unison with all groups in America and especially the Negro people—who suffer most from reaction and fascism—in order to defend our democratic rights."* (JEWISH LIFE, September 1954.)

Yes, the cause of democracy, the rights of all other minorities, are inseparably linked with the liberation struggles of the Negro people. From the "Know-Nothing" party of a century ago to the Ku Klux Klan and the McCarthys and McCarrans of today, history's handwriting on the wall has spelled out that lesson. He who would live must learn it well.

It is not likely that the first group of Jewish settlers who came to New Amsterdam in 1654 had heard about that first group of Negroes who were landed at Jamestown in 1619. The Jews came as pioneers, seeking freedom; the Negroes came as slaves, torn from their homeland.

So, from this beginning it was inevitable that the history of the descendants of these two groups (and of all their kin who came in later years by slave-ship from Africa and steerage-hold from Europe) would develop on different paths. And yet, in all the diverse strands which make up

the web of American history for the past three centuries, there are direct threads which link the interests of the Negro and Jewish people from the earliest days.

Peter Stuyvesant, governor for the Dutch West Indies, who wanted to drive out the first Jewish settlers, has long since turned to dust, as has the Dutch slaver which brought the captive Africans; but anti-Semitism still lives and is nurtured on our soil, and the shameful heritage of slavery—Negro oppression and exploitation—still has its grip.

Indeed, right here in New York the name of the man who first proclaimed anti-Semitism in the New World is known to us in connection with anti-Negro discrimination. We recall the long and bitter struggle against Jimcrow in the Stuyvesant Town houses. Here we saw progressive sections of the Jewish people united with the Negro people in a drive to make the racist walls come tumbling down.

We remember Ben Davis, our City Councilman, who led that memorable battle, and here the thread of history leads to Foley Square where a landlord judge sentences the heroic leader to prison. And in the courtroom we see Negro and Jewish workers standing together against the Peter Stuyvesants of our time: yes, here beside Ben Davis is Irving Potash; John Gates with Henry Winston, and all their courageous colleagues.

WHO CAN FORGET THE AWFUL LESSON OF HITLER GERMANY? How many of those who thought that the Reichstag Fire frame-up trial was aimed at only the Left—how many of the duped were to die?

And so we can all agree with the Anniversary Committee when it warns that "the McCarthyite attacks upon the American people bring the danger of fascism." With confidence, the Committee asserts: "*In this critical moment . . . the Jewish workers and common people will find the necessary strength and wisdom to stand firm on the side of progress and peace, against McCarthyism, fascism and war.*"

Surely none of us who were at Peekskill can doubt that the Jewish workers will be second to none in standing firm against our common enemy. As for myself, I have always felt an especially close bond with the Jewish people; and to me, Peekskill, so terrible in its demonstration of reactionary barbarism, shall ever be a glowing symbol of the unity of Negro and Jewish workers against fascism.

Some day soon I shall write at length, in the context of my life story, about the meaningful experiences I have had



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with the Jewish people. Much of this would deal with my early years as an artist, for here, in this field of music and the arts, all other Americans are deeply indebted to the creativity and cultural gifts of the Jewish people.

But the story would begin even earlier—in my boyhood, when I first heard about the Children of Israel—the epics of Moses and Joshua and Gideon and the fiery Hebrew prophets—the Bible stories that gave imagery to the freedom songs of my people. Recently I was told that our great Negro spiritual, “Go Down Moses,” has now been translated into Hebrew and has been sung to audiences in Israel—and one marvels again at the interweaving of people’s cultures: down through the centuries, moving from language to language, crossing seas and mountains, turning, doubling back ever renewed and enriched . . . imperishable in the common aspirations of mankind!

HERE IS ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THIS WONDER-WOVEN FABRIC OF human culture which unites us all: Not long ago I was asked to sing a song by Anton Dvorák to be used in a film about the life of the great composer which is now being made in his homeland, Czechoslovakia. The words of his song are from the well-known biblical psalm, “*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept*”—the searing outcry of an enslaved people against their oppressors, against “*those that carried us away captive.*”

From ancient Judea these words of the 137th Psalm had crossed the vast reaches of time and distance to stir the hearts of the Negro slaves in our own Southland; and the downfall of slave-holding Babylon was cited by our Frederick Douglass in his famous address, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (1852). “I can today take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people,” Douglass declared, and he went on to recite the moving lines of the psalm.

Half a century later the gifted Dvorák came to our country, studied the melodies and lyrics of Negro song, and drew upon its richness for his own creations—and so, in this way, the words of this very song must have traveled back across the ocean with him; and I am told the song was especially popular among the Czech people during their years of suffering under the terror of Nazi occupation.

But history moves on: Hitler is gone; Prague lives and builds in a new people’s democracy—and now I, an American Negro, sing for her this ancient Hebrew song in the language of the people of Huss and Dvorák, Fuchik and Gottwald:

*Pri rekách babylonckych,*

*Tam jsme sedávali a plakávali . . .*

If it has been true that the Jewish people, like so many other national groups for whom I have sung, have warmly understood and loved the songs of my people, it has also been true that Negro audiences have been moved by songs of the Jewish people. The Hassidic Chant, for example, has a profound impact on the Negro listener not only for its content—a powerful protest against an age-old persecution—but also because of its form: the phrasing and rhythm have counterparts in traditional Negro sermon-song. And here, too, is a bond that can be traced back through the centuries to a common heritage.

In the early days of my singing career and in the theater, the Jewish artists I came to know not only introduced me to the world of Sholem Aleichem through the Yiddish language and folksong; but since many of these friends were Russian Jews, I also came to know the language of Pushkin and the songs of Moussorgsky. And so it happened that, before I had any knowledge of the economic or political nature of the Soviet Union, I developed an abiding love for the culture of the Russian people.

“Un-American!” say the Know-Nothing Knowlands of today—and indeed, the whole world which cries out for peaceful co-existence, cultural exchange and trade between nations, seems altogether “un-American” to those here who are driving hell-bent for fascism and war.

Well, there exists that evil tradition which stretches over the years from Peter Stuyvesant to Pat McCarran, from Jefferson Davis to James Byrnes. But there also exists the great tradition of democracy and of struggle to preserve and extend that democracy—in Jewish history from the resistance of the first settlers to anti-Semitism; in Negro history from the first slave revolt; in all of American history from the earliest struggle for man’s inalienable rights.

Hating and fearing the war-mad rulers of our country, the people of all lands look eagerly for signs of that “other America” they know exists—the America of the common people who also yearn for relief from the burdens of armaments, “spy”-scares and witchhunts, and for the banishment of that ultimate disaster—atomic war.

So let the Tercentenary celebration of the Jewish people serve as a fitting means to let the voice of that other America be heard: for democracy and progress, for freedom and peace—for our land and for all others!