three marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama changed the history of this nation.

50 years later, why does this image still capture our attention and thoughts? What does this image have to say about understanding the legacy of American Jews? What would this image look like today?

This Passover, Bend the Arc invited a number of our friends with different relationships to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and the #BlackLivesMatter movement today to reflect on the anniversary of this seminal moment. Here are their perspectives.
This image reminds us of a time and place where the active working coalition between African-American and Jewish communities was essential in fostering and enabling major social justice and political change in our country. There are frequent written and oral references to those historic years of alliance between American Jews and African-Americans. A picture is still more powerful than a thousand words.

For those of us who knew and worked closely with Dr. King before, during and after Selma, we knew of the strategic role played not only by Rabbi Heschel, but other Jewish leaders across the nation. However, much of what we know and saw, in the absence of a photo record, would not sufficiently convey the magnitude of Jewish support for and participation in the Civil Rights movement.

Rabbi Heschel shared with Dr. King and some of us close to him what he believed was an uncanny and ironic similarity between the experiences and recollections he had about how Jews were treated in Poland before and during the Second World War, and how Negroes were perceived and treated in The United States. Rabbis Heschel, Joachim Prinz, and others viscerally, intellectually and politically understood that the struggle of African-Americans for their full and equal rights was unavoidable and inextricably related and linked to their own struggle against worldwide anti-Semitism.

Hopefully, both Jewish and African-American leaders and members of their respective communities will come to see once again the power and influence for social justice an active alliance and coalition between the Jewish and African-American communities can have in saving and redeeming the soul of America on so many critical issues.
Solidarity is a verb, not an adjective.

Solidarity requires that we act in accordance with our deepest purpose and longings. Much can be learned from a long tradition of radical solidarity between Jewish and Black communities. Today, shifts in our political conditions raise the important question: what are the opportunities for solidarity right now, in an increasingly complicated world where anti-Black racism threatens to erode our legacies?

Within the Jewish community, the increasing prevalence of Black Jewish people from across the diaspora is providing new answers to this question at a time when the fight for Black liberation has again taken center stage. According to the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, a Black person is killed in this country every 28 hours by police, security officers or vigilantes. #BlackLivesMatter challenges us to leverage and activate our legacies of radical solidarity in new ways to eradicate anti-Black racism inside and outside of our communities.

This political moment isn’t just about supporting the liberation of all Black lives—this political moment is about eradicating structural racism so that we can liberate the very humanity of all of us.

David Goodman

President of The Andrew Goodman Foundation, which works to keep Andy’s legacy alive, ensuring today’s young people have the awareness, support, and tools to work for peace and justice.

My family experienced hatred firsthand the day my brother went missing. Once you know the face of hatred, you cannot help but be more sensitive to others’ struggles against it. This photo is a reminder and call to action for Jews—Passover is not only a time to remember our ancestors’ struggle for freedom but also a calling to stand shoulder to shoulder with others in their struggles.

Alicia Garza

Co-founder of #BlackLivesMatter, an online platform developed after the murder of Trayvon Martin, designed to connect people interested in learning more about and confronting anti-Black racism.

How We Talk About Liberation: 50 Years After Selma
Rabbi Heschel walking with Dr. King and others across the bridge at Selma, reinforced the message about the deep partnership between Jews and African Americans in the shared struggle for civil rights.

I responded to that struggle in 1960, when I joined the boycott against Woolworth's that would not let African Americans sit at their lunch counters in the South; and again in 1964 in Mississippi during Freedom Summer to register African American voters. Jews were disproportionately represented among the white participants in the movement. We were there because the struggle for our own justice and freedom are central to the lessons we pass down from generation to generation. And our tradition, culture, and values tell us the struggle of others for freedom is also our struggle.

It’s up to us to carry on these historical and moral teachings into modern times and to deeply engage in the struggle for justice for immigrants, low wage workers, and all who battle for dignity and a just world. The shared struggle continues; with the struggle, our legacy is renewed.

In the Haggadah, we read a story of five ancient rabbis who gathered at a Seder in Bnei Brak. Their people imperiled by the Roman Empire, the rabbis discuss the Exodus from Egypt throughout the entire night.

Five giants gather on Passover, a holiday of exhausting preparation, of exacting ritual. But they do not discuss ritual. They gather to discuss the Exodus. To talk liberation. Until daybreak.

In this picture, I see a modern version of the rabbis of Bnei Brak, men and women of faith gathered together in a show of spiritual might. They do not discuss ritual. They march together for liberation.

In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Reverend King lamented the “white ministers, priests, and rabbis... [who] remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.”

Those of us who are inspired by the rabbis of Bnei Brak, by Heschel and King, take personal and professional risks in refusing to remain silent. But if we shrink from these risks, we forfeit our authority to speak as people of faith.

This year, let our ritual be more than rote. Let’s gather to talk liberation. The hour demands it. Black lives, and the soul of a nation, remain in peril.

Heather Booth
Organizer for over forty years starting in the civil rights and women’s movements. She is the Founder of Midwest Academy and Democracy Partners.

Rabbi Michael Rothbaum
Co-chair of the Bay Area Regional Council of Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice.
Black men, white men, Jews and Christians, with flowers of peace around their necks... what common thirst for freedom bound these disparate people together in the name of justice, liberation and the promise of the American dream? What does it mean for that promise to remain unfulfilled in 2015?

This picture makes me, in turns, heartened and dismayed by two varying narratives. One, where education and hard work, across generations, has paid off and allowed white Jews to live on American soil with unprecedented access, privilege and power in institutions and a society that welcomes their participation and stands with them against those that would do them harm. The other, of communities of color, where hard work and education has yielded individual achievements and successes, but a majority still faces poverty, crime, addiction, and enduring inequities within the education, law enforcement and criminal justice systems of our country.

This image reminds me of just how powerful the pairing of Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel was in teaching love of God as a love of justice. What can we borrow today from these men’s heroic belief in the unseen, their courage to face adversity, and their commitment to only fear a life lived without purpose? Im ain achshav Aimatai? — If not now when?

Yavilah McCoy
Teacher, writer, anti-racism activist, and director of diversity and inclusion initiatives in the Jewish nonprofit sector.

50 YEARS FROM NOW

how might we want people to describe the legacy of the American Jewish community from today?

What ways can we support the struggle for liberation in our time, in our place, so that we may all be truly free? How might we work to restore voting rights? To end mass incarceration? To demonstrate through our actions that black lives matter? To meaningfully address systemic racial injustice within our communities, and in America?

The ancient rabbis had a saying that, “the study is not the core thing, but the doing is” (Pirkei Avot, 1:17).

Studying the history of Jewish involvement in racial justice is critical, but it is not sufficient on its own. The present moment demands our full and complete participation.

Next year... may we renew the legacy together. May we create new images and tell new stories. 
May we march on for liberation.