

ESSAY ROUNDTABLE

Bridge to the Beloved Community: John Lewis’s Interracial and Jewish Community Outreach

Sherry Z. Frank

Member, Board of Directors of the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation, Inc.

Abstract

This article captures my personal relationship with Congressman John Lewis, his wife, Lillian, and their son, John-Miles. Readers will discover Congressman Lewis’s unique ties with the Jewish community and his lifelong commitment to strengthening Black-Jewish relations. It notes the issues he championed—from voting rights to Israel’s security—and includes his own words marching in solidarity with the Jewish community and speaking out for freedom for Soviet Jews.

Keywords: John Lewis; Black and Jewish activism; march; Soviet Jewry

Congressman John Lewis’s life was an embodiment of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream of a “beloved community.”¹ I was extremely fortunate to have been part of his “beloved community” for many years. Millions of us were touched and enriched by this amazing man of humility, integrity, and purpose—and many of us were more than happy to get into the “good trouble, necessary trouble” he often advocated.²

My personal relationship with John Lewis began in March 1982, when he was an Atlanta City Councilman. He spoke at an American Jewish Committee meeting I had organized, bringing together Black and Jewish leaders to discuss the renewal of the Voting Rights Act. Jewish civil rights leader Cecil Alexander introduced John to the gathering. This dynamic meeting ignited passions among the participants to work together—as Jews and Blacks had done for voting rights in the 1960s. Soon thereafter, John and Cecil became the founding co-chairs of the Atlanta Black-Jewish Coalition, a position John held for four years until he was elected to Congress. John’s lending his name to this coalition gave it instant credibility and visibility when it spoke out, particularly in support of a hate crimes bill, a posthumous pardon for Leo Frank,³ and a national holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr.

¹ King’s 1957 sermon “Birth of A New Nation” sounds prescient of the life Lewis would live: “The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation. The aftermath of violence is emptiness and bitterness.” Martin Luther King Jr., “Birth of a New Nation,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al., vol. 4, *Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 155–66, at 162. “The Beloved Community,” The King Center, <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

² John Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>.

³ Leo Frank was a Jewish man who managed a National Pencil Company factory in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1913, he was convicted for the murder of a thirteen-year-old girl, Mary Phagan, who was last seen alive at that factory after having collected her payment from Frank. Frank’s trial was tainted by unsound evidence and public outrage demanding his conviction. Frank was ultimately convicted of the murder. He appealed all the way to the Supreme Court—twice—both times having his appeal rejected. The governor of Georgia at the time, John M. Slaton, commuted Frank’s death penalty to a life sentence, concluding himself that Frank was not guilty, and



Using his voice as a coalition leader, John repudiated the hate-filled statements of Louis Farrakhan and denounced antisemitism throughout his years in public life.

John's enduring legacies include the many miles he marched for justice. Lois Frank, a nationally recognized Jewish leader and activist, and I share treasured memories of marching together alongside him in 1987 during the March Against Fear and Intimidation in Forsyth County and commemorating the twenty-fifth and thirtieth anniversaries of the March on Washington. One of my most cherished memories with John was the observance of the twentieth anniversary of the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Many of us gathered that morning at The Temple, home to Atlanta's oldest Jewish congregation, to retell the story of the 1958 Temple bombing⁴ and then boarded a bus to Selma, Alabama. On the iconic bridge, Rabbi Alvin Sugarman, rabbi emeritus of The Temple, marched at the front of the line—just as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel had done in 1965—and then kneeled to pray before descending the crest of the bridge. In tears, Rabbi Sugarman described how it felt twenty years after Bloody Sunday, looking down at the sea of reporters instead of at the vicious dogs and billy-club-wielding police of so many years ago.

Though he crossed historic bridges in his life of nonviolence and moral leadership, John also was an effective bridge builder. Rabbi Alvin Sugarman said, "If there was ever a man of faith, that man was John Lewis. His faith lived in him, and he lived in his faith."⁵ John was a steadfast supporter of Israel and visited the country with several congressional delegations. He continually voted in favor of Israel's security needs and strongly acknowledged its right to be judged fairly among the community of nations. His support continued with his denouncement of the abominable Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions Movement in 2019.⁶

John was also co-chair of the Congressional Coalition for Soviet Jewry's freshman class. Before embarking to a human rights conference in Moscow in November 1988, he was advised not to raise the issue of Soviet Jewry. However, as always, this man of giant conscience rose to the occasion. He addressed members of the Supreme Soviet, saying, "I will not be satisfied, will not be patient, as long as a Jew cannot be Jewish in his own country. I cannot be satisfied or patient as long as one person of conscience is held in prison."⁷ His concern for the freedoms of Jews in the Soviet Union did not rest. Speaking at "Freedom Sunday" on December 6, 1987, on the eve of the Reagan-Gorbachev summit, John addressed a crowd of hundreds of thousands: "Twenty-five years ago, I marched here in Washington to focus the nation's attention on the injustices and the oppression of segregation. Many of my Jewish friends were with me then, and today I am proud to take part in this March for Freedom for your people who are oppressed in the Soviet Union."⁸

As I worked beside John, I was fortunate to get to know and love his dear wife, Lillian, and their son, John-Miles. When we learned that John-Miles and my son, Drew, both shared the same birthday—May 24, 1976—Lillian and I planned our sons' birthday parties together.

that his innocence would later be proven. This commutation led to intense public outrage, which led to the 1915 lynching of Frank by white supremacists, calling themselves the Knights of Mary Phagan, in Marietta, Georgia, Phagan's hometown. See Leonard Dinnerstein, "Leo Frank Case," *History & Arche, New Georgia Encyclopedia*, May 14, 2003, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/leo-frank-case>.

⁴ On October 12, 1958, a dynamite-fueled bomb was detonated in the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation (since renamed The Temple) in Atlanta, Georgia. The incident was part of a string of synagogue bombings (or attempted bombings) in the South between 1957 and 1958. No one was injured, and the only suspect to go to trial was acquitted. No one was convicted for their role in the bombing. See "Temple Bombing (Atlanta, Ga.)," *Civil Rights Digital Library*, December 17, 2020, http://crdl.usg.edu/events/temple_bombing_atlanta/.

⁵ "Jewish Atlanta Remembers John Lewis with Affection, Respect," *Religion Unplugged*, July 22, 2020, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2020/7/21/jewish-atlanta-remembers-john-lewis-with-affection-respect>.

⁶ Lewis was a co-sponsor of the 2019 House Resolution, "Opposing Efforts to Delegitimize the State of Israel and the Global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement targeting Israel." See *Opposing Efforts to Delegitimize the State of Israel and the Global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement targeting Israel*, H.R. Res. 246, 116th Cong. (2019–2020).

⁷ Sherry Z. Frank, *A Passion to Serve: Memoirs of a Jewish Activist* (Alpharetta: BookLogix, 2019), 291.

⁸ Frank, *A Passion to Serve*, 287.

When John ran for Congress and he and Lillian were spending seven days a week campaigning across the district, John-Miles spent most weekends of that summer with Drew and me at my house. And one of my most lovely memories of that time was when John was sworn into Congress: he proudly had both Drew and John-Miles sitting in the chair with him as Lillian and I looked down from the chamber gallery. Lillian and John became important parts of my family, dancing at my daughters' weddings and even attending my adult bat mitzvah. Later, I was honored to speak at Lillian's funeral—a bittersweet moment in my life.

Shortly after becoming a member of Congress, John visited the Epstein School, where my son, Drew, introduced the congressman to his fourth-grade classmates. Nearly thirty years later—in a moment of true serendipity—Drew, in his current position as the Davis Academy's principal and assistant head of the school, had the honor of again introducing John. This time, it was in front of students, faculty, and family before the congressman spoke and autographed his books at the school.

John loved welcoming young people to his office and to the Capitol. He spoke to countless students, often saying, "You must never, ever give up, must never ever give in, or give out. You must keep the faith." He urged youth to "pick up the baton that he and others have carried." John spoke of the importance of receiving the best education, and he opined that teachers "must teach the way of peace, the way of love."⁹

While representing Atlanta's diverse interests from Washington, John secured major congressional funding for the Centers for Disease Control. As a student of history, he labored for over a decade to secure federal legislation and funding for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.¹⁰ John's lifelong commitment to Black-Jewish alliances led to his being a founding member of the Congressional Caucus for Black-Jewish Relations in 2019.¹¹

Back home in Atlanta, I valued the professional role John and I shared in working for causes near and dear to both of our communities. He remained close to the American Jewish Committee and the Black-Jewish Coalition, often participating in the coalition's Young Leadership retreats. He surprised participants when he walked in to join them for dinners and remained late into the evenings, negotiating honest, and sometimes heated, discussions. Today, the coalition continues to build bridges and foster dialogue.

Before serving twenty-five years as American Jewish Committee's Southeast Area director, I was a leader of National Council of Jewish Women's Atlanta Section. Now serving once again as president of our Atlanta Section, I am proud of the decades of connections we have had with John. In 2017, I introduced John at our national convention in Atlanta when he received the council's Faith in Humanity Award. To a standing ovation, he left the podium to the music of Pharrell Williams's "Happy" and danced into the crowd of activist women who enthusiastically joined with him.

While attending National Council of Jewish Women's Washington Institute on my last trip to Washington, DC, in 2019, several of our advocates met in John's office to thank him for his

⁹ Lewis spoke of these sentiments often in his commencement addresses. See Emory University, "Commencement Keynote Address 2014," YouTube video, 14:46, May 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvD6ZfviH3g>.

¹⁰ For a remembrance of Lewis and his contributions to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, see "Historically Speaking: The Legacy of John Lewis through The Lens of The National Museum of African American History and Culture," National Museum of African American History and Culture, October 16, 2020, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/event/historically-speaking-legacy-john-lewis-through-lens-national-museum-african-american-history>.

¹¹ Rep. Lewis, along with Reps. Brenda Lawrence (D-MI), Will Hurd (R-TX), Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-FL), and Lee Zeldin (R-NY), established the Congressional Caucus for Black-Jewish Relations to "raise awareness of each community's sensitivities and needs in Congress and around the country and to provide resources to members of Congress to empower them to bring Black and Jewish communities together, combating stereotypes and hate and showcasing commonalities." See "5 Things You Need to Know about the Congressional Caucus on Black-Jewish Relations," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.ajc.org/news/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-congressional-caucus-on-black-jewish-relations>.

ongoing support for women, children, and families. Among the numerous awards on display in his office, we were delighted to see a bust of Hannah Solomon, the founder of the National Council of Jewish Women among them.

John promoted justice for people of every race, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and he railed against everything that marginalized and discriminated against others. He championed civil rights, reproductive freedom, LGBTQ rights, voting rights, gun safety, climate and environmental issues, and balanced judicial nominees. He lived each day reaching out to anyone who passed his way. “Black and white, straight and gay, Christian, Muslim, or Jew, we are one people, one family, one house,” he said to all who listened.

Our John Lewis was often referred to as the “Conscience of Congress.” His enduring legacy is that he never stopped working for the ideal of Dr. King’s “beloved community.” As I visited with John just a few days before his death, I said, “Goodbye, and I love you.” This humble “boy from Troy,” as he was affectionately called, closed his eyes, and smiled. He was an extraordinary leader and a true prophet in our time—one who walked with kings but also had the common touch. John Lewis left an indelible mark on America and the world. May his memory forever be a blessing.

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