

United for Freedom: Black and Jewish Leaders Rally for Soviet Jewry

The Soviet Jewry Movement created in the 1960s was a response to the widespread social, economic, and political oppression faced by Jews in the Soviet Union. Increased anti-Semitism and the suppression of Jewish religious and cultural life under the Soviet Union pushed those concerned in the U.S. to launch a global campaign aimed at securing freedom for Soviet Jews to practice their religion without state persecution, discrimination, and to emigrate to Israel, the United States, or other countries in search of greater freedom and opportunity.

On December 6, 1987, 250,000 people gathered for the “Freedom Sunday” March in Washington, D.C., just before the first Reagan-Gorbachev Summit. This march became the largest-ever organized rally in the U.S. for a Jewish cause and marked the height of the Soviet Jewry advocacy campaign in the United States.

While this period was a time of tension between Black and Jewish communities, prominent Black and Jewish leaders, including John Lewis and Vernon E. Jordan, stood together in solidarity for the release of Soviet Jews. Vernon E. Jordan, the president of the National Urban League, demonstrated his support for the Soviet Jewry Movement as early as 1970, leading up to the Freedom Sunday event in 1987. At a 1974 meeting of the Atlanta chapter of the American Jewish Committee, Jordan quoted Ovadia Yosef, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, who had declared at a rally for Soviet Jewry: “If a Jew is in pain in any place in the world, every Jew feels that pain.”

‘Let Our People Go!’

*Freedom Sunday was the culmination of 15 years’
effort on the part of American Jewry on behalf
of their Soviet brethren*

