

Martin Luther King ANTI-APARTHEID COALITION

Rabbi Brian Walt

Congregation Beth Israel
Gayley Terrace
Media, PA 19063

September 17, 1985

Dear Rabbi Walt:

As a member of the M.L.K. Coalition Steering Committee, I read your letter of September 4, 1985. I would like to take up some of the points which you raise. Until now, I have not been involved personally in any of the discussions with New Jewish Agenda, nor was I present at the meeting of Agenda addressed by you which gave rise to concerns about your participation in the August 24 demonstration. For this reason, I feel myself appropriately placed to give my perception of the decision-making process of the coalition's Steering Committee, since I was privy only to this.

In the context of discussions concerning speakers invited by our Education Committee to speak at M.L.K. Coalition events, the coalition's Steering Committee decided that we would need to determine that any such speaker's positions on South Africa were consistent with those of the coalition; to invite speakers with divergent views to such events might, after all, lead to confusion about what we stood for. When some members of the coalition and others heard you speak at the Agenda meeting, they raised concerns about the extent to which your positions were consistent with ours. The Steering Committee referred the matter back to the Education Committee, charging the Education Committee with the responsibility to work with you prior to your addressing any subsequent coalition event--the intention being to allow us to clarify our positions, to allow you to clarify yours, and to figure out how to deal with any inconsistencies which might be discovered. At no stage was a judgment made about the concerns which were raised--indeed, the details of these concerns were not enumerated, in part so that we could obtain all points of view at some future point, without prejudgment--nor did we preclude the possibility of your participation in any future events. To repeat, what we decided was to work with you to deal with any inconsistencies in our positions before you spoke at an M.L.K. event.

Before this decision could be acted upon, we were overtaken by events. Hilda Silverman apparently yielded her invitation to you. (This is confirmed by the account in your letter). Unfortunately, the demonstration organizer who was informed of this change did not recognize your name as one which had been discussed by us previously. Since this person was responsible for putting out one version of our flyer, your name appeared on this flyer's speakers' list before the problem was

discovered. When the problem was discovered, a discussion took place which reaffirmed the earlier Steering Committee decision--at this time, a certain amount on discussion of the substance of the concerns also took place. Although I was not present for most of this August 21 meeting, I feel that the decision reached was the only decision which could have been reached. If it was considered important to meet with you prior to a future educational meeting, this was rendered more urgent by the greater scope and size of a demonstration. Clearly, by August 21 there was hardly time to arrange a pre-demonstration meeting with you, let alone holding that meeting and then determining its outcome and implications for our cooperation. Under these circumstances, it was quite proper for us to postpone the required meeting with you (if such a meeting were to be necessitated by any future events) until after the demonstration, and to request that New Jewish Agenda provide another speaker. I much regret the discourtesy involved in "disinviting" a speaker, particularly one whose name was evident on our publicity material, and I must apologize for any part which I played in the confusion which led to your appearance on our speakers' list. On the other hand, once we found ourselves in this regrettable position, I fail to see how we could have acted other than we did from that point on. I also regret that we did not convey our own process and thinking to you more clearly. In the confusion that has followed these events, many people have been talking to each other, sometimes at cross-purposes, rather than dealing with the problems in a measured and reasonable way. From the dribblets that have worked their way back to me, it appears that whatever discussions have been taking place have led to a heightening of feelings and a proliferation of wounds, rather than a solution to our problems. This surely does harm to us all.

The problems emanating from the coalition seem to me to have been the result of individual error, committed in haste while acting under pressure. Basically, it comes down to one person, heavily overworked, treating a change in speakers as the routine change it appeared to be since he did not remember the name in question--yours--from a discussion held weeks before: a human error, which I feel sure you will understand, particularly in an organization which is run by volunteers, and which has no procedures for proscribing participants and no intentions of developing such procedures.

I hope you will share in the spirit of self-criticism with which I write this letter. In fairness, can you say the same about your part in this affair? When you sit at your typewriter, are you not acting far more deliberately, with far more time to think about the ramifications of your actions, than were any of us in the run-up to the demonstration? Do you consider it fair to throw around the accusation of antisemitism in such an ill-considered way, when you yourself cannot have failed to have noticed the number of Jewish speakers who spoke on our platform, while the whole problem arose precisely because we invited a New Jewish Agenda speaker? I could sympathise with your thinking more in other circumstances, but how is it that you rationalize your accusation of antisemitism since we did invite the Agenda, and since we did extend

our platform to other Jewish speakers? Is it the case that you consider every person or group who has a difference with you, personally, to be antisemitic? I object to this kind of special-pleading not because it is intellectually lazy, nor because it is politically arrogant, but because it is so unproductive. Just imagine what it would be like in a diverse, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-faith organization and movement like ours if every time there was a political difference, people started to accuse each other of racism, antisemitism, etc. Sometimes those charges might be justified--but those are very serious and special occasions. The worst aspect of your accusation seems to me the way in which you trivialise the charge, by using it in a way which damages the coalition, with the intention perhaps of valorizing you own position, but without any substantial backing. In short, while our mistakes were real, I feel that they were accidental, human errors; yours, on the other hand, have been quite deliberate and gratuitous. Whose interests do they, and the damage to the coalition's reputation which may have accrued from them, serve?

In substantive terms, regarding the differences between your positions, and those of the coalition: I would prefer to leave this discussion to others who are better able to take up these points. However, in brief: I would disassociate myself personally from any analysis based on the percentage of South African wealth owned by Jews. I, too, see a similarity between that statement and classic antisemitism. I neither know nor care what that percentage supposedly is, since I do not regard it as relevant to the anti-apartheid struggle. What I would ask you to bear in mind is that the person who reportedly made that statement is not a member of any coalition committee, and that his analysis is not that of the coalition. I do not believe that he spoke as a representative of the coalition, nor did he announce himself as such. So while I disassociate myself from this statement, I do not apologise for it, since I feel in no way bound by it nor answerable for it. You seem, in your letter, to have attributed the statement to the coalition--perhaps this episode, better than any, illustrates the importance of clarifying who speaks on coalition platforms, since, as this case testifies, misunderstandings can and do occur when individuals' opinions are taken for those of the coalition. This incident confirms, for me, the care which the coalition takes in such matters.

Concerning Israel's relationship with South Africa: you state in your letter that Israel should not be seen as the lone devil, the most dangerous devil, as far as disinvestment is concerned. As far as you go, I agree. I think we must see what is specific about the relationship of any country with South Africa. We cannot ignore the fact that the U.S. is South Africa's largest trading partner, no matter what our loyalties to this country; nor does any loyalty I have to my native England compel me to ignore that country's historic relationship with South Africa, and the fact that it has been until recently the largest investor in South Africa. Indeed, our loyalties and identifications with these countries gives us a special incentive to try to get them

change their policies, and special responsibilities to clarify and criticize their roles. So while I would agree that Israel is not the lone devil, I feel that it is inadequate to leave your analysis at that, since this gives the misleading impression that Israel's role is much like that of any other country. This is not the case; if that is the impression you are giving, it can only be because you yourself are misinformed, or because you are deliberately fudging the issue. Israel invests in the bantustans and cooperates with South Africa in its military and nuclear research. These activities set it apart from others. It is clearly incumbent on responsible leaders of the Jewish community to clarify these relationships, rather than sweeping them under the rug. This seems to me to be rather more responsible a policy than accusing critics of Israel's role as being (once again) antisemitic, as you do in your letter.

As I stated above, our previous discussions about you did not lead to a decision precluding your future participation in our events. Unfortunately, your subsequent actions, particularly the orgy of name-calling in which you have indulged, have not improved the impression you give as one who behaves responsibly and with sound judgment. I would, in particular, question the actions of a community leader who makes damaging accusations against the leading anti-apartheid organization in the area, without apparent regard for the factual foundation of his accusations or their consequences.

The last paragraphs of your letter raise concerns in my mind about how accurate your positions are, or at any rate how consistent with those of the coalition. Had I heard you say what you wrote in public, without elaborating it further, I would have considered your information to be misleading and would have recommended discussions with you before future cooperation. Nothing which has been said or done convinces me that we were wrong to have decided to proceed in that way--indeed, the correctness of this policy has been confirmed by the questions which your letter raises but does not settle. It is regrettable that such misunderstandings arose from this decision and that they were blown out of proportion. I hope that all those who are magnifying the confusion and proliferating the damage will stop doing so, if, indeed, it is still possible.

In enclose a journal article whose last paragraphs deal with the Israel-South Africa relationship, although I doubt that its contents will be news to you.

Sincerely



Patrick Hagopian

cc. Hilda Silverman (New Jewish Agenda); M.L.K. Coalition Steering Committee members.