

# PRAYING WITH MY LEGS

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I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until *I prayed with my legs.*

**FREDERICK DOUGLASS<sup>1</sup>**

19th century abolitionist, activist, politician, and author



Douglass, Frederick. [A&E Biography](#). April 2005.

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For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. *I felt my legs were praying.*

**RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL<sup>2</sup>**

20th century Jewish theologian and Civil Rights activist



Heschel, Susannah. [Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel Marching with Other Civil Rights Leaders from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama](#). 21 March 1965.

- 1 | Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845.
- 2 | As recounted by his daughter, Dr. Susannah Heschel. [“Following in my father’s footsteps: Selma 40 years later”](#)



## Praying With Our Legs in 2017, Erika Davis<sup>3</sup>

| Erika Davis is an educator and writer; her blog, “Black, Gay and Jewish: A Gay Black Woman’s Discovery of Her Jewish Self,” shares the story of her conversion to Judaism.

“[Approaching] Martin Luther King Day we have an obligation to live up to the words of Frederick Douglass. Each year we congratulate our forefathers for the work they did during the Civil Rights Movement. We sift out the grittiness of King’s fight for Black freedom for his more palatable motifs of non-violence. We listen to rabbis give sermons, we attend dinners intended to inspire us into action and instead of getting things done, we tuck away the black and white photos of King and Heschel and go on with our lives...

When Heschel marched with King almost 60 years ago he said he prayed with his feet. Did Heschel know that he was paraphrasing Douglass? Was he using the words of a freed slave turned abolitionist to drive home his point about his time with King? I’m not sure. But in these 60 years while much has changed in regards to racial equality, we still do not live in a world that is racially equal. The institutionalized and systematic racism in our country exists because we allow it to with our complacency and our willingness to look the other way...”<sup>3</sup>

### Discussion Questions

1. Which of the two opening quotes, from Douglass and Heschel, speaks more to you? Why? How does the context inform how you relate to them?
2. What does Davis mean when she writes “we sift out the grittiness of King’s fight for Black Freedom”? Does this resonate for you?
3. Why historically have we “listened to rabbis, we attend dinners” instead of “getting things done”? Are there ways in which you have “sifted out” complex conversations or engagement about race and racial justice for easier ones?
4. If you grew up in the Jewish community, what is the narrative you have heard around Jewish communal involvement in the Civil Rights movement? How can that narrative explicitly or implicitly give permission for Jewish institutions to stand on the sidelines when it comes to engaging in racial justice today?
5. How does Davis’ framing of the quotes motivate you volunteer or otherwise take action? What steps can you take to “get things done” as it relates to racial justice?