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DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.,
AND THE BIRTH OF THE SOVIET JEWRY STRUGGLE AND OF THE NEW RUSSIAN IMMIGRANT
COMMUNITY

It is a truly a privilege for me to be speaking here today, in a circle of exceptional friends and partner organizations. For someone who first came to the US almost 20 years ago on a student visa with only two years of home study of English, it is also an exceptional opportunity to tell the story of my people through the prism of the history of America's civil rights movement. First and foremost, my deep bow of gratitude goes to Ms. Bertha Lewis, our extraordinary civil rights leader and by now I must say my teacher in so many ways. We at RCCMB feel extremely fortunate and proud that Ms. Lewis, busy as she is, took a genuine and deep interest in the Russian-American community, our new generation of immigrants and their struggle for fair integration and equal opportunity, and took our problems close to her heart. I thank her and her team at The Black Institute for taking the lead in organizing this event in a very short period of time, in-between her many other higher level engagements, especially now given her appointment to the transition team of our new Mayor. As we say among ourselves, Bertha is our joint ambassador there for the Afro-Russian progressive bloc. Having such a special friend who feels us as closely as she does, is our exceptional asset, particularly so given that our immigrant community, the third largest by language in the city, is not represented on the transition team nor on the current or incoming City Council, among other places. So let us give Ms. Lewis a warm round of applause.

We've been brought together today by two distinct topics. They are not directly connected to each other, and it will be our joint work to connect them here. One is the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's taking the stand against the oppression of Jews in Soviet Union. We identified this as a pivotal moment in Black-Russian and Black-Jewish relations that we want to reflect upon with you here. The other topic is the joint advocacy of Russian and Black

progressive leaders and organizations for the unprivileged and disadvantaged of our days, for the present and future immigrants.

Let me start with Martin Luther King. I am not a practicing historian, even though my terminal degree, as they call it, is in fact in 20th century history. I am really looking at these events as a community organizer convinced that we are only able to move forward if we understand where we are coming from. So let me walk you briefly through this part of the story. Dr. King got himself involved in the cause of Soviet Jewry shortly after the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He responded to the invitation of Moshe Decter, a humble man who did not hold any significant position and was one of a small number of Americans concerned with Soviet Jews at the time. There was no organized Jewish protest yet in Soviet Union, not a single American Jewish organization focused on the issue, and it was also the beginning of détente in Soviet-American relations, so one had to be highly attuned to injustice and have a foresight to identify the oppression of Soviet Jews as a major international issue for the years to come.

So on October 21, 1963, Dr. King took part in the Conference convened by Decter. And he co-signed its “Appeal to Conscience”, with 7 demands that are listed here; one of them, number 5, had to do with emigration, but it was mostly thought then as emigration to Israel. Next month, on November 20th, he gave two sets of remarks to two major Jewish denominations. Here’s a photo from the first event at which he spoke, receiving Solomon Schechter award from Rabbi Heschel who stands to the right and George Maislen on the left. And even though in each case his remarks on Soviet Jews were just one paragraph, they were most commented upon in American Jewish press, as you can see here. And here is a paragraph from the other speech.

Thus, King, and in his persona the civil rights movement in the US were present at the creation of another, international movement that leads us straight to where we are today. This movement became known as ‘Let My People Go’, or the Soviet Jewry movement, and it was the most visible part of a larger fight of Jews and non-Jews for minority rights in the USSR, including the most fundamental right to be able to leave the country. And that is our key difference from

other immigrant communities today – unlike them, our older generation had to fight for the right to exit, which left most with little interest or resources to fight for a better deal in their new country. This movement for the freedom of exit eventually led to the immigration of about a million of Russian-speakers of various faiths to the US. And it was part of an even larger movement for democratic reforms, that, by bringing down the one party rule, contributed to the end of the Cold War that had placed such a heavy burden on both America and Russia.

Let me quickly run through some of the milestones of that movement:

1964: Founding of Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, a grassroots group that grew out of the civil rights movement. We're honored to have one of its leaders Glenn Richter among us here today; I look forward to celebrating half a century of SSSJ next year. 1965: The removal of the National origins quotas from the US immigration law made a large scale immigration of Soviet Jews a more realistic topic for consideration.

1969: the start of the Jewish emigration movement – the refusenik movement - WITHIN Soviet Union. 1971: The founding of National Conference on Soviet Jewry (whose founding executive director Mr. Jerry Goodman we're privileged to have among us here today). 1974: The Jackson-Vanick amendment conditions trade with the USSR on Jewish emigration. This idea was not exactly favored by the Nixon Administration, to put it mildly. In fact, as we now know from the tapes, State Secretary Henry Kissinger was telling Nixon at the same time, literally, quote, that if all Soviet Jews were gassed by their government, this would not be an American concern.

Fortunately, many Americans, including many Black civil rights leaders, felt the opposite. Thus, in 1975 New York Black leaders called upon their community to join the Solidarity Sunday for Soviet Jews – with some very important words that I quote here: “just as the color of our skins has historically set us apart and subjected us to the same discriminations....We see the parallel and we feel the need to speak out...” These words were important because they recognized the underlying quasi-racial divide in Soviet Union, which was not very well understood by many others. For many Americans in the Soviet Jewry movement the primary

causes of their protest were, first, the suppression of the Jewish religion and, second, the denial of exit visas, mostly to Israel. Both very important causes of discontent for many Soviet Jews. And yet, many other, educated, big city Jews, did not care that much about religion regardless of government oppression, and while loving and admiring Israel, they were also not looking to go there. For these people, the root cause of their struggle was really the lack of equal economic opportunity. (I would include my immediate relatives in this group .)

1978: Protestant denominations in Soviet Union mount their own campaign with a 10,000-strong appeal to the US Congress, for the right to emigrate. And they borrow from the Jewish movement the biblical line – ‘Let My People Go’. In 1980, The Refugee Act of the Carter Administration really created the most humane system of refugee integration thus far. Those Russians who were able to come under this law when refugee quotas were high had a great advantage in terms of their starting conditions in America compared to everyone who came later. 1987: The “March on Washington” for Soviet Jews, not surprisingly, borrowing from the experience and the imagery of the 1963 March. 1989: Lautenberg Amendment eased the refugee process not only for Jews but also for other religious minorities. 1991: freedom of emigration as well as the freedom of religion won in Soviet Union and its successor states, and in almost all of them they’ve been preserved to this very day.

So where does all this bring us now. In the remaining time, I want to touch upon three things. First, the present state of the Russian-American community; second, the struggle of its Jewish part for integration in American society and its relation with the Jewish world; and third, our relations with the Black community and the emerging alliance of progressive folks in both of them in pursuit of a fair and comprehensive immigration reform.

The first thing to know, our tribe is highly diverse - religiously, ideologically, by their immigrant experiences depending on the time and status of their arrival, and in economic terms. Those who came as refugees when Soviet Union was still a superpower got a much better deal than those who came after their native country collapsed, and under different kinds of visas. Alas, most of the refugee wave know little or nothing about the civil rights movement, instead, they tend to thank Ronald Reagan and his party for the reception and the benefits they

got. We need to acknowledge and respect the reality of their experience while providing a platform for the newer and more progressive crop of immigrants, given that 10,000 Russia natives become permanent residents every year; and to address prejudice, including racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in the older part of our community, that's mostly fueled by right-wing media in South Brooklyn. Our goal is to gradually transform our entire community, through successful examples of working together with other minorities and educating it about the role played by their visionaries, such as Dr. King, in our own past.

In economic terms, Russian-Americans are polarized: we have a small number of super-rich, who do not really participate in their community and don't need to. Meanwhile over 70% of Russian Jewish elderly live in dire poverty. Many of them immigrated while still in their working age, with education and skills, but did not secure stable employment. And we have very little in between – few Russian immigrants in middle class jobs in civil service, nonprofit world and large private corporations, only a tiny handful in management and executive positions.

Our biggest challenge, indeed, of tragic proportions, is the long-term under- and unemployment of our best and brightest, our most educated and skilled, particularly those with background in public affairs and government service. Some of them have both Russian and American graduate degrees. There are not that many of them, but the stumbling blocks that they face are a true calamity not just for them and their families but for all of us, because some of them are our most natural leaders, who should be a resource for others, and yet they are prevented from exercising this leadership by their economic situation. We urge our friends in the Black community to stand with us in saying that when people who have foreign and American graduate degrees and professional experience, have not been accused of any crime, are being denied employment year after year, and the only thing different about them is they come from Russia, that this looks like a form of economic persecution, like “cruel and unusual punishment” that is un-American and such instances should be a public and government-level concern until they are resolved.

On the flip side of this coin, Russian immigrants are virtually not represented at all in professional positions on the staff of government offices in the areas with significant Russian

population, such as upper Manhattan. In September, we submitted several hundreds of signatures under a petition to our esteemed Congressman Honorable Mr. Rangel, urging him and all other elected officials in the area - to help create one position for Russian public affairs professional in one of the government offices in the area. We trust that our voices will be heard.

Second. Russian Jews in the American Jewish world. A highly sensitive topic, but I've already paid some price over the years for speaking about it anyway. There is no other large community to which Russian Jewish and even non-Jewish immigrants feel closer than the American Jewish world. We're all committed to its strength, unity, and success. And a number of its agencies continue their exceptional job at providing the very basic things to the most needy of our immigrants. That said, the times when the only or even the most likely path to integration of Russian-Jewish immigrants into the wider society led through the American Jewish world, these times are over. Today, in political and economic terms, Russian Jews are really a people on its own rather than a subset of American Jewish world. This was plain to see in the City Council elections in South Brooklyn, when US-born Jewish candidates competed ferociously against Russian-Jewish immigrant candidates and defeated them. While some of the limits to possible integration are recent and include shrinking resources and increasingly narrow focus of many agencies, there are also deeper historical barriers. One is a history of inequality within the Jewish world, which was scientifically established in mid-20th century by Russian-Jewish-American Nobel Prize winning economist Simon Kuznets who found that Jews in America had more economic inequality among themselves over time than any other ethnic or religious community. This inequality has shown itself in the data that we have, indicating that in the past decade, that is before the recession, about 70% of American Jews had incomes over 35,000 a year, while for Russian-Jewish immigrants it was just the opposite – about 70% made less than 30K a year. A second historical barrier – not unrelated to the first - is the legacy of European racial divides, of the notion of cultural superiority of European West over the East that was internalized by the more affluent German Jews and imported to America. Whatever the reason, while Russian Jewish immigrants make up to 20% of all New York Jewish

population, they hold merely 1 to 2% of decision-making positions in Jewish communal service, and no such jobs at all in any of what is known as Jewish social justice organizations.

This was not always the case. East European Jewish immigrants had known better times, particularly during the civil rights movement. Let me just mention Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who was perhaps the closest ally of Dr. King in the Jewish world. I often hear laments: where is Heschel today? Why don't we have someone like him now who would be able to relate to the Blacks and other minorities as he did? Few of those asking remember that Heschel was an immigrant, a Polish Jew born in the Russian Empire, who fled from European racism. He came to New York in his thirties, having only published a book of Yiddish poems, wasn't asked to validate his credentials, didn't get an extra degree – and yet was hired to teach full-time at the most prestigious Jewish seminary across the street, which gave him the basics necessary for a larger leadership role. Today, he would've likely been offered at best an adjunct position on which he wouldn't be able to survive; he would be looking for a job outside of the academia and turned down as overqualified, not the right fit, a round peg in a square hole. His prophetic criticism of inequalities around him would not have helped him either. He would probably not have made it to Selma or would have come there invisible, hiding from the cameras. This is of course not just about how our very own Jewish world has changed, it's also and perhaps even more so about how our entire economy and educational system have changed, making the recognition of such immigrant talents much less likely, especially if they come from smaller, less assertive community with less of a political muscle, like Russian or African immigrants.

In light of all these complexities, some of us have been organizing as Russian-Americans of different faiths, united by our language and history, and redefining ourselves through dialogue with other minorities. This is precisely what RCCMB was created to do over 2 years ago, when we held our very first event with a Latino organization, and this is why we're proud to have joined forces with The Black Institute and other allies around immigration reform. We see this as a sequel to the civil rights struggles that helped our own folks to get here. On immigration reform: many think of it as the legalization of the undocumented, predominantly Latinos – and RCCMB unconditionally supports this as the only sensible, humane, and realistic solution –

regardless of the fact that there are relatively few such cases in our community. But for Russians the reform bill includes other essential provisions no one is really talking about. Such as: the expansion of the Lautenberg Amendment for persecuted minorities; more flexibility for asylum seekers; removal of language requirements for elderly immigrants who want to naturalize; etcetera. Provisions for refugees and asylum seekers are particularly key, given the authoritarian, oppressive policies in Russia and some other post-Soviet countries versus the ridiculously low rates of approval of refugee applications from Russia.

We also share the view of The Black Institute that the bill could and should be made more progressive and more reflective of the needs of the smaller, more disadvantaged communities like Russian, African, and others. It should retain the diversity visa that has benefited immigrants from underrepresented countries. Likewise, it should include more robust integration and equal opportunity provisions.

One of Dr. King's favorite quotations was from John Donne: "No man is an island." No immigrant or minority group is an island either. But for many of us it makes a conscious effort to broaden our horizons to be able to see it. We are fortunate to be making this joint effort with all of you here today for the benefit of our communities and for the future of our country. Thank you very much for joining us on this exceptional occasion.