

WE STILL HAVE A DREAM

Shana Tova! I'm not sure if any of you heard the preview of my sermons yesterday on CBS radio. I promise, it didn't do them justice. This is actually the second time Peter Haskell has called me to find out what I'll be speaking about at the Holy Days. As we were chatting, he asked me if I get particularly nervous about delivering High Holy Day sermons. For the first 25 years of my rabbinate, I would have said that these were the most nerve-wracking public appearances I ever make. But this year, as many of you know, I was invited to deliver the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day sermon at Foster Memorial, the AME Zion church here in Tarrytown. I have never been more nervous about delivering a sermon in my entire career.

Foster Memorial has a long and proud history; it was once a stop on the Underground Railroad. I have been a guest reader at the MLK service for several years and I consider it an honor to be involved. Each year that I've participated the preachers have been from one or another of the black churches in Westchester, and I have been mesmerized by the message they bring and even more by the style in which they bring it. And now they wanted to hear from me?

I knew that I did not have to use the call and response that we associate with that type of preaching, though I really wanted to. More importantly, I worried about what I could possibly tell them about Brother Martin that they don't already know in their very bones? What meaningful message about Dr. King can an upper middle-class white Jew bring to a predominantly working-class black Christian congregation?

As it turns out, I needn't have worried. With regard to style, the congregation was very forgiving. I even got a few "amens" during the sermon, which definitely helped. You should feel free to try it at any point. "Preach it, rabbi" would also work...

When I gave the sermon, back in January, I had not even realized that this August would be the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, and of Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. As I've read the material about that event that has come out over the past six months, I've come to realize that not only was my delivery okay, my initial fear about what message I could bring to Foster Memorial church was also

unfounded. It was not a question of “what could a white Jew say to a black church about Civil Rights?” After all, Jews were at the very heart of the Civil Rights movement. In fact, 50 years after the march, it was more a question of “where have we Jews been recently?”

All of us should know – more than a few of you sitting here can remember – that Jewish youth were very involved in the demonstrations and the marches and the Freedom Rides. But Jews were not only foot soldiers in the Civil Rights movement; Jewish leadership was at the heart of the movement. Al Vorspan, a co-founder of the Religious Action Center in Washington, recently reflected that “What has happened over the decades of nostalgia and history [is that] it’s become basically a black march featuring Martin Luther King and a great speech. But the truth is, it was a genuinely inter-religious thing, and the backbone of the March on Washington, like the backbone of the entire Civil Rights movement of that time, was the black-Jewish coalition. Now it sounds nostalgic, but without the black-Jewish alliance there was no Civil Rights movement.” [Forward, 8/30/13]

There were two Jewish leaders in particular, both rabbis, both immigrants, who took up the cause of Civil Rights because they believed it to be an integral part of what it meant to be a Jew: Joachim Prinz and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz was an important figure in Jewish life in pre-war Berlin. As Hitler’s popularity began to grow, Prinz spoke out. Berlin Jewry - urbane, cosmopolitan and seemingly well-integrated - saw Hitler’s anti-Semitism as a passing disturbance in 1500 years of German-Jewish history. Prinz, who grew up in rural eastern Germany, was much more familiar with the deeply ingrained anti-Semitism of the German commoner, and he quickly recognized the danger Hitler posed. Thanks to his repeated warnings, thousands of German Jews left in time. Thanks to his outspokenness, the Gestapo arrested him regularly, and finally expelled him in 1937. Because “ministers” were exempt from US immigration quotas, he was able to come immediately to the United States.

Rabbi Prinz quickly rose to prominence here as well, both with his congregation in Newark, and with national Jewish organizations. He devoted much of his life to the Civil Rights movement. He saw the plight of

African Americans and other minorities groups in the context of his own experience under Hitler.

From his earliest days in Newark, he spoke from the pulpit about the disgrace of discrimination. He joined picket lines across America protesting racial prejudice, from unequal employment to segregated schools and housing. In 1963 he was President of the American Jewish Congress, and as such he represented the Jewish community as one of the organizers of the August 28th March on Washington. He was also asked to speak, and as a measure of the respect in which he was held in the Civil Rights community, he was given the slot immediately prior to Dr. King. This is part of what he said:

“I speak to you as an American Jew.

“As Americans we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which makes a mockery of the great American idea.

“As Jews we bring to the great demonstrations, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a two-fold experience -- one of the spirit and one of our history.

“In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody’s neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity.

“When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned in my life and under those tragic circumstances is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

“A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder.

“America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the

sake of the Negro, not for the sake of the black community but for the sake of the image, the dream, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.”

Rabbi Prinz’ son, Jonathan, wrote, “I think that ... including speeches in Berlin during the Nazi regime, his own feeling was this was the most important speech he ever gave... He understood very early on there was a direct connection between the plight of African Americans and the Jewish people.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel’s story is a similar one. Rabbi Heschel was one of the greatest Jewish thinkers and greatest Jewish doers of the 20th century. He too was a refugee from Hitler. And he too was drawn immediately to the cause of Civil Rights, and quickly became a friend of Dr. King. I taught the congregation at Foster Memorial about the connection between Heschel and King.

I told them that the two men came from very different worlds: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was a Polish immigrant; Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was an American descendant of slaves. They came from different religious traditions: Dr. Heschel was descended from a long line of Chasidic Rabbis; Dr. King was a fourth generation Protestant preacher. Their origins could not have been more different. But they shared a belief that

- religion is not just about beliefs and prayers
- religion is not meant to be limited to the churches and synagogues
- religion is not just about asking God to do something for us.

No, for Heschel and King, religion speaks in the voice of the Hebrew prophets, who taught that:

- religion is only of use if it calls us to seek justice and righteousness;
- religion is only of use if it sends us out from our houses of worship to make the world a better place
- religion is only of use if we ask what we can do for God.

And that is the reason that these two men – the white Polish Rabbi and the black American Reverend marched side-by-side from Selma to Montgomery to protest the racism that poisoned America and humiliated its African-American citizens. Later, Heschel was to famously say, “When I marched in Selma, I felt as if my feet were praying.” For him faith in the goodness and oneness of God is expressed through the language of feet, and hands and spine. Heschel said, “A Jew is not asked to take leaps of faith, but

rather leaps of action.” God must not only be believed; God must be behaved. [Schulweis]

Dr. King’s message was not only for African Americans. He had a broader message of justice and non-violence that he preached to the entire world. He spoke out against the war in Vietnam because he understood that violence against anyone, anywhere can lead to violence against us, here. He understood that if you are only worried about your group and she is only worried about her group and I am only worried about my group, then we will remain fragmented and divided, and we will never accomplish anything.

After being arrested in Birmingham in 1966, Dr. King wrote from his jail cell, “I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about [discrimination] in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

This idea, which we Reform and Conservative Jews used to carry at the very core of our faith - that whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly - is the primary reason that American Jews in such great numbers participated in the Civil Rights movement, even to the point of dying for the cause. Jews understood, as Prinz and Heschel and King understood, that neighbor is not a geographical term but a moral concept; that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere; that we are tied in a single garment of destiny.

We Jews used to know that. We used to both believe it and behave it. We have been at the forefront of every American social justice movement of the last century. Throughout our history we have been inspired by the Torah’s repeated command to take care of the poor, the widow, the orphan – to protect the most vulnerable among us. And we have been called to action by the Torah’s command, repeated 36 times, more than any other commandment – that “The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” 36 times we read this. By contrast, the phrase “They’re not your problem” appears exactly never. [Rosenberg]

Strangers. Not just immigrants, though it refers to them too. Strangers literally means “those who are strange to you.” Those who are different than

you. Those who have a different culture, a different religion, a different socio-economic level, a different skin color, or even just different concerns than you do. Their concerns may not be your concerns. Their differences may make you uncomfortable. And yet:

-Since you are to love them as yourself, you are also to make their concerns your concerns.

-Since whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly, you are to make their concerns your concerns.

-Since injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, you are to make their concerns your concerns.

We Jews used to both believe that and behave it. But I see less and less of that today. I don't mean that we ignore those who are suffering. We certainly do not. Our Tikkun Olam volunteers are caring, active, passionately concerned about the needs of the less fortunate. We should be proud of all that we do as a congregation to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Those who participate are living out the words of the Torah and the words of the Prophets. It is important, even life-saving work. But I am here to tell you today that it is not enough.

One example. Temple Beth Abraham is one of the mainstays of the Tarrytown Food Pantry, which provides food for hundreds of families each month. Families which are primarily Latino; families which may or not have legal documentation. The food we provide is of critical importance, so don't take what I am about to say as license to not bring in your Yom Kippur donation. In fact, consider doubling your donation. The food we collect is important. But even as we continue to provide it, we need to remember to ask ourselves the next-level question: why do these families need the food to begin with? Why are they unable to make it without help? And perhaps more to the point, what can we do to change the equation, to change the structural issues that make it so hard to break out of poverty? What can we do so that our grandchildren are not still collecting food for another generation mired in poverty?

There are many reasons that people fall into poverty, so I cannot easily answer the "why" questions. However, the answer to the "what" questions, the answer to "what can we do" is that we can do what Jews have been doing for a century here, and for millennia before that: We can speak out.

We must speak out, because the most urgent and the most tragic sin is silence. Rather than ignoring the complexity of the problems facing our nation we can educate ourselves on the issues which disproportionately affect the most vulnerable among us. We can advocate on behalf of those who cannot, and we can teach them how to do it for themselves. We can build coalitions with those who agree with us, and try to convince those who don't. We can support legislation and lobby our representatives. It takes work, and the results may take a long time to appear. But unless we begin to move to that next level, we will be forever collecting food.

There are several members of our Tikkun Olam group who are eager to begin this process of advocacy. The Religious Action Center in Washington and Reform Jewish Voices of New York will help us get started. This year you will see invitations to gather with others to work on the issues about which you feel passionately. I hope that you will have the opportunity to lobby in Albany or on Capitol Hill. Our 10th grade Confirmation class lobbies every year when they go with me to the Religious Action Center in DC. You would be incredibly proud of their poise as they stand in our Senators' offices and articulate why they care, as Jews, about how our nation treats the less fortunate, and why they expect their elected representatives to support legislation which brings America closer to the promise of a just society. And for those who are worried, lobbying on issues is not a violation of the separation of church and state. It is the opposite; it is insisting that our nation embrace the values on which it was founded. It is the modern manifestation of the ancient prophetic call for justice. If the prophet Isaiah were alive today, he would not be prophesying in synagogues - he would be up on Capitol Hill, advocating for the most vulnerable among us, speaking truth to power.

For what, precisely, will we be advocating? There are, unfortunately, plenty of social justice issues facing our nation, and the choice of what we work on will largely depend on your interests and passions. In general, we support the positions of the Union for Reform Judaism, positions determined by you, members of the URJ, at the Biennial Convention, in which we are all invited to participate. The issues go far beyond poverty. But, to stay with my food pantry example, here are just a few possibilities:

-We could advocate for living wage legislation, to ensure that if someone is willing to work a full time job, they can expect they'll earn enough to feed themselves and maybe even their family. And then we could stop collecting food.

-We could advocate for a rational Farm Bill which might finally and permanently be separated from Food Stamp programs, and which would help lower prices for basic goods. And then we could stop collecting food.

-We could advocate for ongoing improvement in access to health care for the poor, so they will get preventive care and not miss so many days at work, for which they are not paid. And then we could stop collecting food.

-We could advocate for sensible immigration reform that provides effective and humanitarian border control policy; a reduction in the time that families are separated; more avenues for legal entry into the United States; and opportunities for those already here to become permanent, lawful residents. If they could come out of the shadows, if they were not easy marks for unscrupulous employers, they could earn enough to feed their families. And then we could stop collecting food.

The truth is that the only real, permanent solution to the social justice issues facing our nation is legislation. Legislation is shaped by public opinion. And public opinion, especially on the issue of how we treat the most vulnerable, has always been shaped by religious values.

Think again about the March on Washington. It was an incredible moment; it galvanized the nation. And yet. And yet, none of the discrimination, none of the restrictions, none of the humiliations faced by African Americans were changed as a result. Not one. Today we tend to see the end of legalized racial discrimination as the inevitable result of the arc of history, the culmination of a series of incredible moments, of marches and demonstrations and sit-ins and Freedom Rides which finally and inexorably crushed the forces of discrimination. Only that's not what happened. What happened is that the President was finally able to pass a somewhat watered down version of the Civil Rights Bill. And that's when discrimination began slowly to end.

Of course the demonstrations mattered. Of course the marches and Freedom Rides helped shift public opinion, which helped turn congressional opinion. But without the legislation, nothing could change. And without the

loud and insistent and prophetic voices of the faith community, the legislation would not have passed.

Here's how the columnist James Reston put it just a few days after the march:

“The first significant test of the Negro march on Washington will come in the churches and synagogues of the country this weekend.

“It is no good waiting for a political reaction in Congress, for if there is no effective moral reaction out in the country, there will be no effective political reaction here. If the preachers said what they really thought about this racial crisis the political balance on racial equality might easily be transformed. And if such a mammoth demonstration, dramatizing the basic religious concept of equality, does not get an impressive response even from the churches, Congress could easily conclude that the nation was indifferent or worse.” (NY Times, August 1963)

Of course, Congress concluded the opposite, in large part because the churches and synagogues did speak out. We need to be vocal once again.

The 50th anniversary of the March on Washington calls upon us to not accept the status quo as a given. It calls upon us to continue to serve the needy while also insisting that America fulfill its creed as a land of liberty and justice for all. I hope that you will be part of that effort.

Standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial 50 years ago, Martin Luther King said, “There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, ‘When will you be satisfied?’” His answer, taken from the Hebrew prophets, is a stirring call to us, standing on the threshold of a New Year: “We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”