



Are We Still Marching with King and Heschel?

Thoughts on Parshat Beshalach and Martin Luther King Day

By: Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, PhD

It is well known that on the night before he was assassinated, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. seemed to prophecy his own death. “[I might not get there with you](#),” he said to the crowd of striking sanitation workers, and supporters, and ministers that came to see him. He was talking about the Promised Land. He was talking about freedom and equality. King was talking about justice. He did not get there with them, with us. On the next day, April 4, 1968, standing on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed by a racist white gunman with a history of white supremacist activism.

However, most people forget other parts of King's speech that night. The reason King was in Memphis that night was to revitalize the sanitation workers' strike; to mobilize people for a mass march the next day. He was preaching that night about the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable tells the story of a man who is lying injured by the side of the Jericho-to-Jerusalem road. A Priest and then a Levite pass him by on their way to Jerusalem and don't stop. A Samaritan who is then passing by does stop, and he helps the injured man. King articulated his understanding of the story as follows:

[T]he first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked, was, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But then the Good Samaritan came by and he reversed the question. “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

That's the question before you tonight. ... The question is, if I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them? That's the question.

King used this story to point toward those on the sidelines and demand that they also get into the struggle. There may be many seemingly good reasons to hold back, to stay in the office or watch from home. However, the real question should not be: what risk am I in if I participate in this action, but what will happen to these people if I do not.

This is a theme that had vexed King for years. He addressed this also in his [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#). The letter was addressed to eight white clergy (Christians and Jews) who had taken out a full-page ad in the local Birmingham paper to chastise King for being an extremist, for not being patient, for precipitating violence. King refutes these accusations but then he expresses his deep frustration with the white clergy who claim that they are his allies.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice...

The white clergy who are asking for moderation and civility are actually those who are standing in the way of justice. Those who are demanding that the Black demonstrators have patience, that now is not the right time, are answered by the unavoidable fact that Black people in the United States had already waited some three hundred years for freedom and justice, and that those in power would never admit that “now” is the right time—any “now.”

It has become an accepted practice in the American Jewish community around Martin Luther King day to set up the picture of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching over the Edmund Pettus Bridge with Rev. King. This is surely something to be proud of. However, that type of wan ancestor worship is nary enough to meet today's challenges. Is the American Jewish community still marching with King? With the Black community against racism, anti-Blackness, white supremacy?

After the George Floyd murder—nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds of torture in which Floyd cried out that he could not breathe, then cried for his mother, then stopped crying out, then stopped breathing—documented in a video that went viral and forced the criminal legal system to respond—there were unprecedented street demonstrations. Even in the midst of a pandemic hundreds of thousands of people were on the streets. People of every race and religion and no religion.

However, and this is the stumbling block which is the “white moderate” that King spoke of, a year later, after demands that out of control police violence be confronted and controlled by radically decreasing the bloated budgets of urban police departments and investing that money in the social services (mental health, education, job training, restorative justice) that communities of color and poor communities need, support for Black Lives Matter had sunk to pre-George Floyd levels. It's not the right time, the “white moderates” (who are not all white) said. You must not come up with such extreme solutions, the “white moderates” said. You are causing a backlash, they complained.

Where are we, the Jewish community, standing at this moment? If I judge by the paucity of synagogues and communal institutions who would bring themselves even to voice the phrase Black Lives Matter, we are not in a good place. We are not marching with King or with Heschel.

The Alter of Kelm, [Reb Simchah Zissel Ziv](#), preached and wrote that the prerequisite to righteousness (literally *qabalat haTorah*/receiving the Torah) is radical empathy, what he called *nosei ba-ol'im haverso*/carrying one's fellow's burden with him. Radical empathy according to Reb Simchah Zissel was the ability to use one's imagination to understand another's pain and suffering. It is what brought Moshe to walk out of the royal house and be able to see that the Israelites were enslaved and suffering unjustly. It is what brought Moshe to smite the Egyptian taskmaster who beat an Israelite slave. (Moshe, still halfway between Pharaoh's house and his Israelite roots, could see no other resolution to this pain than killing the perpetrator.)

Moshe's radical empathy brought him back from Jethro's house to the house of the Pharaoh with the brazen demand to free the Israelites—and then brought him to confront God with anger when Pharaoh refused that demand and worsened the Israelites' situation.

In this week's Torah portion, after God wrought unbelievable havoc on to the Egyptians and destroyed their grains, their beasts, their economic viability, the underpinnings of their country—when even the Pharaoh's house groaned under the burden of destruction—the Israelites marched out still in a state of skepticism. Standing on the banks of the Reed Sea with the Egyptian army at their backs, [they yet cried out to Moshe that they had really wanted to stay in Egypt](#), that it was not all that bad there.

The Rabbis say that it took one courageous, faithful, Israelite—[Nachshon by name](#)—to step into the Reed Sea for it to split, whereafter all Israel followed, all forgetting that moment of refusal earlier. Nachshon had not worried “what will happen to me.” He worried “what will happen to all of Israel.” He marched forward into the unknown, on to the path to the Promised Land.

We, the Jewish community today, are still, I am afraid, screaming at Moshe that we would rather eat the tasty morsels of Egypt for liberation is too scary. We cower behind the well-armed guards and fortress-like battlements of our synagogues and communal institutions and are protected from the demands of the streets, from those who are directly impacted by police violence, those who are impacted by the predations of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “Who will protect *us* if not the police?” we demand, not tarrying enough to wonder who is included in “us” and who is not, both in the Jewish community and beyond.

If we put our faith in the power of the police, and police adjacent and dependent organizations like the private security firms, we close off the possibility that what really will keep us safe is a larger vision of “us.” We close off the possibility that we only move toward lasting safety when we stand in solidarity with other communities and they with us. We cannot get from here to there if we are convinced that security is dependent on “hardening our targets” (our Temples, Synagogues, community institutions) so that an attacker will go down the block. We only get there when we can envision a city in which we all keep each other safe, where we truly believe that my wellbeing is your obligation, and your wellbeing is my obligation. Will we, like Moshe, walk out of Pharaoh's house and finally see that?



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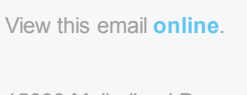
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