

Martin Luther King, Jr. Shabbat 5772 - 2012

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Here we are on MLK Shabbat. A celebration of justice. A Shabbat of memory. Progressive synagogues across the world are working to synthesize to two moments of sacred time – our Shabbat and our remembrance of MLK.

This year, I want to offer 3 responses that might guide our thoughts and ultimately our actions. And, while we normally deliver the D'var Torah in one moment towards the end of the service, tonight, I'll offer it in 3 parts.

Here's the guiding question: *How should we respond to MLK Shabbat?*

Response #1: PRIDE

The Reform Jewish community has been a leader in nearly every major social and political movement of the past 50 years, making Jewish values a reality and significantly influencing the course of history.

We should feel proud that our movement has championed the pursuit of justice for generations. This is our inheritance as Reform Jews and certainly as Isaians.

Reform Jewish congregations know that **talking** about our values is not sufficient; we must **put them into action**.

Which is one of the reasons why, in 1961, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism) — the umbrella organization to which all of our congregations belong — passed a resolution establishing the **Religious Action Center** in Washington, D.C., declaring, "Social Action will succeed to the extent that in our synagogues, individually and collectively, we have the understanding and the daring to make Judaism relevant to the great issues of our time." (http://rac.org/50/shabbat_tzedek/)

And what was the "great issue" of 1961? The fight for civil rights.

Reform Jewish congregants, synagogues, professional and lay leaders, and institutions joined the fight by participating in rallies, marches, protests, sit-ins and advocacy to effect change.

Martin Luther King, Jr. came to speak here, in this sanctuary, to share his vision of a world in which justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24)

How should we respond to MLK Shabbat? On this Shabbat, we should feel proud that our Temple has been a part of the fight for justice. On this Shabbat we celebrate our tradition, our leaders, our movement, and our community.

The 4 minute video that you are about to watch illuminates the Reform Movement's relationship with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and our involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. It is a **proud** chapter of our Movement's history, reminding us of the achievements of our past, reflecting the challenges of our present, and inspiring our hopes for the future.

VIDEO: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=z6jvnNQ3HuM

Response #2 – AGITATION/ANGER

One of my rabbinic mentors warned me never to agitate people on Shabbat. Don't make congregants angry or uncomfortable...not when they've come into the sanctuary to find peacefulness and rest. But I think there's a way to do it that doesn't completely destroy Shabbat.

In fact, I think there's a part of us that **wants** to be agitated. That wants to be woken up. Just this past week at the Jewish World Watch I-witness awards, Rabbi Schulweis talked about waking up the "slumbering angels of our better selves." They're in there, those angels, but they're sleeping. (Or, perhaps pretending to sleep...)

So, for a few moments, let's consider a second reaction/response to this Shabbat honoring the legacy of MLK – **AGITATION**.

I know we live in the capital of YOGA studios. There are more here than in any other city in the world, I've been told. We are constantly looking for ways to promote peacefulness, calmness, serenity...but agitation can be healthy. It's an indicator that we are **NOT** okay with our current situation – with our surroundings. That we can no longer sit quietly or silently as the world revolves around us.

And rather than try to settle that down or soothe it away, I want to nurture it for just a few moments. Anger or agitation can move us from where we are to where we want to be. **And we need to be moving forward.**

During the high holy days I asked: "Where do we stand in 2011? 56 years after Rosa Parks took her rightful seat in history... Where are we now in the movement for civil rights? In spite of ALL of our achievements, our work is not yet done."

I'm not going to recount for you a litany of abuses and injustices. I do not believe they will move us. I fear we know them all too well. I could spend hours briefing you on the scope and depth of injustice in our city, let alone in our state, or country, but I doubt that will make you angry. At

best, it would make you depressed. Or tired. Or, even bored...which is the *opposite* of agitated. Too many statistics and stories of abuse or degradation make us numb. Unable to react.

And rather than get angry (which may motivate us to get active) we pause. We wait. We hope someone else will get angry. Maybe someone else can do the work on our behalf? Maybe someone else can lead the charge and we can opt in along the way? Perhaps a colleague will invite us to be a part of a charitable event? Perhaps the temple will choose an issue and then we can lend our support?

Here on MLK Shabbat, if we are not careful, we can enter this sanctuary and celebrate his legacy and then we can leave. There is no expectation for action. We sang. We prayed. We considered his words. We marveled at his image. We told the Rabbi at oneg, "Lovely sermon!" and stopped for frozen yogurt on the way home.

How can we allow ourselves, on this Shabbat, to experience a reaction like anger or agitation that might LEAD us to action?

This week, Rev. William Lamar, the senior pastor at Turner Memorial AME Church in Hyattsville, wrote an article for the Washington Post titled "On Martin Luther King Day, remember the message, not the monument" reflecting on the MLK memorial, the newest monument on the Mall.

He has not yet visited the monument. He is actively resisting. **Why?**

In part, because this monument allows us to revel in the beauty and the majesty of MLK without confronting the ugliness of inequality that still permeates our society, without having to do or to say anything as a result of the visit.

In his book, The Art of Memory, James Young (a scholar in the field of monuments and memory) introduces memory as a foundation stone of the Jewish tradition. It constructs Jewish identity, it shapes theology, and it propels rituals. Remember the days of old... (Deut 32:7); Remember what Amalek did to you (Deut 25:17); Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt... (Ex 13:3) In memory of either destruction or joyous freedom lay the source of the Jews' covenant with their God of history."

But Jewish identity is shaped not only by the act of remembering, but by the desired effects of such "**Memory-Work**". As we remember our Exodus from Egypt, we say that our redemption is incomplete until we work to redeem others who are still enslaved. Young writes: "the art of memory remains incomplete, an empty exercise, until visitors (i.e. to a monument) have grasped – and then responded to – current suffering in the world in light of a remembered past."

Memorials are not just about representing memory but "for performing it and, most important, forming it into civic action." (Which is a bit revolutionary.) "It is not enough to ask whether or not our memorials remember the Holocaust, or even how they remember it. We should also ask

to what ends we have remembered. That is, how do we respond to the current moment in light of our remembered past? ...For were we passively to remark on the contours of these memorials, were we to leave unexplored their genesis and remain unchanged by the recollective act, it could be said that we have not remembered at all.

I fear that our Shabbat service tonight could serve as a memorial or a monument, and so I want to invite in a little agitation.

Cornel West talks about the *santaclausification* of Martin Luther King. According to Dr. West, with our vapid celebrations of King, "He just becomes a nice little old man with a smile -- with toys in his bag -- not a threat to anybody, as if his fundamental commitment to unconditional love and unarmed truth does not bring to bear certain kinds of pressure to a status quo... The FBI said he was: "The most dangerous man in America."

Think for a moment: Do you *remember* King as dangerous?

Rev. Lamar writes: *It is hard to say what King would be doing and saying if he were alive... He would not be very popular among the educated black middle class because he would remind us of our entanglement in the trappings of success and material excess while neglecting the dire educational and economic straits faced by millions upon millions of our people. He would not be popular among the corporatocracy (the powerful oligarchy of corporations, banks, and governments that control finance and economics and therefore politics) because he would call out their unchecked greed, astronomical salaries, and their erosion of the protection and prosperity of workers. He would not be popular in the White House because American muscular militarism has not yielded to peaceful ways to resolve conflict -- and the era of government by and for the haves to the exclusion of the have-nots seems uninterrupted. Neither Democrats nor Republicans utter the word poverty -- and the middle class they fetishize with rhetoric and neglect with policy shrinks every second. He would not be popular with the self-centered, culturally accommodated American church. He would remind us that we exist to serve, not to be served.*

Simply put, he would not be popular. And he would be making us feel very uncomfortable with our choices or our passivity in the face of other people's choices.

We would be agitated.

Rev Lamar concludes: *A frozen Martin Luther King is not what we need. A sweet, saccharine ahistorical Martin Luther King is not what we need. We need the King who died unpopular among blacks and whites because he was more concerned with truth and justice than popularity and access. The King who said no to Vietnam. No to American empire. No to a silent, lethargic church.*

We need the King who said yes to the dignity and humanity of the poor. Yes to the personhood of people of every race, gender, and socioeconomic status. We need the King who knew that the parched land of America needed the waters of justice in order to bloom into what the founders envisioned even in their brokenness. (Rev. William Lamar is senior pastor at Turner Memorial AME Church in Hyattsville.)

On this Shabbat, I want to invite us into a response of anger/agitation because it is too easy to visit the monument – or to occupy this space – and to believe that our act of “remembering” or “celebration” is sufficient as an act of justice when in fact, memory is meant to be a stimulant for action. Memory must lead us towards action not exempt us.

We are part of a prophetic Judaism. And **WE** are the prophets commanded to use our words and to lead others towards a more just and fair world. This will not make us popular. Even more so, it may challenge the comfort we work so hard to build into our lives, our community. As MLK wrote: “Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability but comes through continuous struggle.” Looking for change? Get comfortable with discomfort.

It’s really up to us: **Are we willing to allow ourselves to get agitated once again so that change, through our actions and through our struggles, might be possible?**

3- INSPIRATION.

We feel proud. We feel agitated. And now I want to suggest that a final response to this Shabbat is to feel inspired. Inspire – literally, to breathe into. I want you to feel like, in addition to the second soul you receive on Shabbat (*neshama yeteira*) that you also get an infusion (a spiritual transfusion) of breath, of the force that animates you – that gives you life. That helps you live.

We talk a lot about Tikkun Olam here at Isaiah as well as in the Reform movement. And for good reason...one could argue that Jews have been dedicated to the pursuit of tikkun olam for as long as they have been a people. It’s part of our DNA. Tikkun – to heal, to fix, to repair. Olam – The world.

Tikkun Olam is the imperative to go out and to ACT in this world – to fix what is broken. To mend what is torn. To heal those who suffer from inequality, degradation, and discrimination. It is not an option, it is a commandment. Go out and fix what is broken.

It is also the BELIEF that the world, as it stands today, is NOT the world as it will always be. It is the belief that we can change the course of human history. That we are not locked into a system that has and always will oppress its people.

Tikkun Olam is not just action, **it is a tenet of faith**, in and of itself – that we believe in our capacity to change and to grow. Even more radical...we believe that OTHERS have that capacity as well. Even more radical that that, that we believe the world, full of its industrial complexes and entrenched systems of injustice and armies of lobbyists and Super-PACS...that even the world has the capacity to change and to grow.

Tikkun Olam. The world is not as it should be, but, together, we can collect the broken pieces and weave them into a fabric of equality and peace.

During the time of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, Jews became even more organized in their pursuit of tikkun olam, working together and communicating with the people in power to achieve their goals. Can we allow ourselves to be inspired and organized once again?

Inspire – to breath into... Take in a breath. Let this Shabbat breathe into you its beauty and poetry. Let this community breath into you the possibility and power of working with one another. Let our tradition breath into you the pride of our ancestors' work and their commitment to justice. May we leave this sanctuary filled with pride, agitation and inspiration...ready and renewed in our commitment to continue the work of our ancestors and the path of our tradition.

Shabbat Shalom.