

RABBI SANFORD RAGINS
EMERITUS RABBI, LEO BAECK TEMPLE
REMARKS AT A MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. BREAKFAST
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You can tell a lot about a nation by the person it chooses to honor. If you know who the heroes or heroines of a nation are, you know something about its soul, its dreams and its nightmares. Sometimes the best, and sometimes the worst, is shown in those choices, but they are, I think, always very revealing. Gandhi expresses part of the soul of India, and Mandela whom we just lost expresses the best part of the soul of South Africa. Both are beacons of light and inspirations for their homelands and for the world.

Psychologists call it projection, that ancient habit of the human mind by which we take some of what we think or fear or need and cast it out into the world onto others, especially onto our leaders, or even our gods. We endow these figures with parts of our selves, and when we kneel down before them or follow along after them we are actually submitting to our own selves, sometimes our best selves, and sometimes not.

That is why it is so important to choose national heroes or heroines very carefully: in making those choices we say something about who we are, and we also give shape and direction to what we are becoming. A bad choice can fulfill the biblical insight that the sins of the parents are visited on the children, and, of course, the reverse is also true: a good choice, a wise choice, can turn aside curses and bring blessings for generations to come.

My ancestors, the rabbis in Roman times, understood that when they made a deliberate, conscious decision to keep the books of the Maccabees out of the Bible. Judah and his brothers were simply too bloody and too violent for the rabbis to accept them as folk heroes, and so they did their best to keep the Maccabees out at the fringes of Jewish consciousness. That is where they remained until our times: dim, marginal figures, not worthy of Jewish attention, let alone adulation.

Whom did the rabbis put at the center: Moshe rabbenu, Moses who was neither a general nor a king, but a liberator, a shepherd and an advocate of the people, a rabbi and a tragic figure, who died without

being able to enter the Promised Land.

That's what we Americans did twenty-eight years ago in 1986, is it not? In establishing a national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., we have bestowed one of our country's greatest honors on a modern Moses. Like his Hebrew predecessor, he was neither a general nor a president, but a liberator, a shepherd and an advocate of the people, a teacher and a tragic figure who could only glimpse the Promised Land from afar. In this act we Americans said something very revealing, and very hopeful, about ourselves.

I imagine a few cynics will dismiss this holiday as simply a hollow gesture prompted by white guilt and ultimately meaningless. But they are wrong. Through this act, we have laid a part of the American soul open for all to see, and what is shown there is heartening. A country that can establish a day in honor of a man like this has something profoundly healthy at its core. Every year in January, we Americans pause, not for picnics or fireworks or parades, but for reflection, and celebration of the legacy of our black Moses.

What is that legacy? Although King was not yet forty years old when he was murdered in 1968, he left behind a body of writing and preaching, and a record of public works of enormous power and significance. In that short, intense career, there were, it seems to me, two essential features.

The first has to do with something that has come to the top of the agenda for many Americans since King's death: a quest for spirituality. A vague restlessness is loose in the land. A dim yearning for something beyond the material, something transcendent, a source of meaning. Everyone talks about spirituality, and everyone is looking for it, but no one is quite sure what it is or where to find it.

But King knew, and we can learn from him. The model of the religious life which he embodied is very different from the narcissistic head-tripping that characterizes so much of what passes for spirituality in our culture. King believed that if you were looking for happiness or you wanted to feel good about life or yourself, then religion had nothing to offer you. His religious faith began in the confines of his heart, but was too powerful to be contained there. It had to be expressed in the world, in society, in the market place and in politics. Meditation and study and prayer --all were vital to King, but never ends in themselves.

Here he is in his own words, speaking about God back in 1958: "...

God has been profoundly real to me in recent months. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm and known resources of strength that only God could give. In many instances I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship. Behind the harsh appearances of the world there is a benign power. To say God is personal is not to make him an object among other objects or attribute to him the finiteness and limitations of human personality; it is to take what is finest and noblest in our consciousness and affirm its perfect existence in him. So in the truest sense of the word, God is a living God. In him there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart: this God both evokes and answers prayers."

The living God. Many preachers talk about the living God, but King believed that when the search for transcendent meaning is serious we must go into the world, the real world, with all its horrors and possibilities. Where do you live the religious life? Not in the sanctuary, but only out there, in the streets and in the halls of the legislatures and, if need be, in the jails.

"The contemporary church [he wrote] is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are."

For King, what took place in the privacy of one's soul and or in the moving beauty of a religious building was only the prelude, the overture, the beginning of spirituality. Once the worship was over and the living God had been encountered, the real work of religion began, and that required more than a certain state of mind or a mode of feeling. That required action and deeds which to others might appear political, but were actually deeply religious. That required spiritual acts animated by the power of the living God who demands liberation and justice and peace.

Here is King, in the concluding section of the last Sunday morning sermon he preached. He was a guest speaker at the National Cathedral in Washington on Palm Sunday, March 31, 1968, five days before his death, and even now, years later, the power of his message reaches us:

[He said] "We're going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands. And so, however dark it is, however deep the angry feelings are, and however violent the explosions are, I can still sing 'We Shall Overcome.'

We shall overcome because the arc of a moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right - no lie can live forever. We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right - truth crushed to earth will rise again. We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right - as we were singing earlier today, 'Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the demon known, stands a God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.'

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

Thank God for John, who centuries ago out on a lonely, obscure island called Patmos caught vision of a new Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God, who heard a voice saying, 'Behold, I make all things new - former things are passed away.'

[He concluded] God grant that we will be participants in this newness and this magnificent development. If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice and brotherhood and peace. And that day the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy..."

The second feature of King's legacy flows directly from this dynamic social spirituality. If religious truth shows us what must be done in the world, then the religious person will take care to act forcefully in such a way that faith is fulfilled, not betrayed. That means not words, and never raw power expressed through a fist or a gun, but nonviolent, direct action. King's commitment to both action and nonviolence made him many enemies, from those who thought he did too much and those who wanted to do more. In that old argument over ends vs. means, King always held that means were critical, and that the most noble ends would be corrupted if those who pursued them were either passive or violent. Like Gandhi, King knew that there was transforming power in

nonviolent action, and that power had to be asserted with conviction.

When he was a prisoner in the City Jail in Birmingham, Alabama in April of 1963, he wrote a letter to eight prominent liberal white ministers who had called upon him to stop inciting civil disturbances. This is part of what he wrote them:

"You may well ask, 'Why direct action? Why sit-ins and marches ...? Isn't negotiation a better path?' You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored... I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth...we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation."

What an important model for social change! To bring justice, King believed, we have to walk a fine line between the twin evils of violent revolution, on the one hand, and the preservation of a dehumanizing status quo, on the other. And he believed this delicate balancing act was difficult, but possible. And then, he devoted his life to showing us how to do it: with great self-discipline and moral courage of astonishing firmness, he tottered above us for a few dazzling years, until he was cut down and was no more.

Like the first Moses, Martin Luther King, Jr. was only permitted to see the Promised Land from afar. But also like his predecessor, King left a Torah behind, a body of teachings and the example of a life, to guide and inspire those who are struggling to move out of the desert. If we need proof that we are still in the desert, perhaps even still in Egypt, and not in the Promised Land, we have only to look at the news of the day. We live, as he did in a broken world.

Thank God we had him!

Thank God we have the wisdom to honor his memory!

Thank God we still have his Torah to guide us!