
The Sermons of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. A Jewish Response

Elliot B. Gertel

Though it has been an official state and federal observance only for less than a decade, it seems that we have always blessed the birthday of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., through the almost two decades since he was tragically gunned down by a madman, at the prime of life, when his intellectual and political gifts and talents were in full blossom and gave promise of even fuller growth in every way. It's good and appropriate that we have a special day to mark his achievements. We need only hear his name to recall his unique and stunning powers of oratory which yielded the immortal "I Have A Dream" address, as important to our national heritage as Lincoln's address at Gettysburg or FDR's various inaugural addresses.

King's greatness is such that whenever we think of the turbulence of the Sixties, we mark his courage in the cause of nonviolent demonstration for civil rights, for in his peaceful but forceful use of boycotts and sit-ins and prayer he subjected himself to terrible dangers of brutality at the hands of sheriffs and deputies and mobs, not to mention malevolent men in seats of national power, who regarded his message of equal rights and opportunities to be a greater threat to their petty prejudices than the worst criminal action. When we ask if there is such a thing as a modern prophet, we recall that many found in his unforgettable oratory and in his risking of life and limb for the message he bore—the spirit and the uncompromising truth of the Hebrew Prophets of old.

All these things we can now officially remember and honor on Martin

Luther King's birthday as we recall the blessing to American society and to the world community of conscience that was his life. And we thank God for this life, not only for his spiritual and social gifts, but because he worked a genuine miracle in our own time before our very eyes, before the lenses of cameras. In view of the violence of the Sixties, the vicious hatred of many whites for blacks, and the pent up resentment many blacks had for whites, it is a miracle that despite these things, the necessary revolution for civil rights was as peaceful as it was. Future as well as past and present generations have Martin Luther King to thank for that miracle, along with the heroes and martyrs of all races and religions who stood by his side. Our gratitude for the miracles he wrought will ensure that his birthday will be remembered and cherished in years to come.

We have rightly recalled the social and oratorical achievements of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., but I want to move beyond these achievements, however noteworthy, beyond even the biography of the man, however inspiring and touching, and look at his thought, at his intellect, especially in his approach to religion. For we are in danger of forgetting that his pulpit was a learned pulpit. He earned a doctorate in philosophy for a fine study of the thought of Kierkegaard. He read widely. He knew the Bible and the great religious writers as well as he knew figures in the news, and he applied to his reading the same insight that spurred him on to *make* the news. He read a great deal of history and philosophy, read history even as he made it, and was influenced by great philosophers even as he influenced social attitudes to the benefit of justice and compassion. One of our ancient Sages of the Talmud remarked: "When a person's good deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom will be enduring; but when a person's wisdom exceeds his good deeds, his wisdom will not be enduring." King's good deeds were so abundant that people will always remember his wisdom, but we ought not forget that his wisdom was a foundation for his actions.

One of his earliest books was a collection of sermons entitled *Strength to Love*, published in 1959 when he was 30. It's hard to believe, reading these sophisticated and intelligent and deeply erudite sermons, that the author was younger than 30 when most of them were first preached: In one sermon, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," he affirms a God Who is at work in His universe, a God Who, in King's words,

. . . is not outside the world looking on with a sort of cold indifference. Here on all the roads of life, He is striving in our striving. . . . As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it. . . . When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and He is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. (p. 107)

Yet Martin Luther King was most sensitive to the complexities and the enormities of evil. His own experiences in the South, his own reading of history, his own familiarity, indeed, with Jewish history, brought depth and knowingness to his struggle with evil in his own time and place. He asks:

But why is God so slow in conquering the forces of evil? Why did God permit Hitler to kill six million Jews? Why did God permit slavery to continue in America for two hundred and forty-four years? Why does God permit bloodthirsty mobs to lynch Negro men and women and drown Negro boys and girls at whim? Why does not God break in and smash the evil schemes of wicked men?

King's own glimpses into the faces of prejudice and malevolence made his formularization of the classical biblical approach to evil ring all the more true and challenging. He says:

I do not pretend to understand all the ways of God or his particular timetable for grappling with evil. Perhaps if God dealt with evil in the overbearing way that we wish, he could defeat his ultimate purpose. We are responsible human beings, not blind automatons; persons, not puppets. By endowing us with freedom, God relinquished a measure of his own sovereignty and imposed certain limitations on himself. If his children are free, they must do his will by a voluntary choice. Therefore, God cannot at the same time impose his will upon his children and also maintain his purpose for man. If through sheer omnipotence God were to defeat his purpose, he would express weakness rather than power. Power is the ability to fulfill purpose; action which defeats purpose is weakness.

Dr. King is careful to point out that God does not abandon us to our freedom.

God does not forget his children who are the victims of evil forces. He gives us the interior resources to bear the burdens and tribulations of life. When we are in the darkness of some oppressive Egypt, God is a light unto our path. He imbues us with a strength needed to endure the ordeals of Egypt, and he gives us the courage and power to undertake the journey ahead.

In the tradition of the African-American spirituals, Dr. King finds inspiration and courage to face oppression in the story of the Exodus from Egypt, which the Jew has remembered every day, morning and evening, in the prayers of the synagogue. But to the message of hope and patience found in the old spirituals, he adds, with refreshing poetry and with arresting religious and political sophistication, a call to action. That call is reminiscent of a beautiful observation of our ancient Rabbis. In the biblical saga of the Exodus, the Israelites panicked when they saw Pharaoh and his army pursuing them to the Red Sea, and they cried to Moses, "Didn't we tell you to let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." Moses, moved by their panic, assures them that God will

work for them immediately. But God says to Moses: “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward!” (Exodus 14:11–15) Our Sages commented that the people had to leap forward into the sea before God would part it for them. They had to take the initiative!

Martin Luther King, Jr., contributed much to making American Christianity take the initiative in social issues. He led his African-American brothers and sisters, and all who were uplifted to join in their struggle, close to the spirit of the Hebrew Bible in bringing the moral power of the Exodus story and of the Hebrew Prophets to bear upon the social evils of our time.

He identified with the Israelites whose redemption in the Exodus was an inspiration for all who seek spiritual and economic freedom, and he identified, as we saw, with the Jews who suffered in the Holocaust. When in his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” he preaches that “unjust” laws must be protested, even if doing so means going to jail, he observes that it

was “illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country’s antireligious laws.

It is apparent that King regarded such resistance as a hallmark of the kind of person his philosophy wanted to create.

Interestingly, it is not only identification with the Jew as victim of injustice and with both ancient and modern Jew as symbol of hope and renewal and redemption that highlights Dr. King’s sermons. He draws on Jewish philosophers, upon the Jewish intellectual tradition, as well. In “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” he writes:

All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an “I-It” relationship for an “I-Thou” relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.

King did not segregate himself intellectually, just as he would not allow his people to be segregated socially and economically. His writings draw on many religious thinkers and many philosophers, from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas to Matthew Arnold to Reinhold Niebuhr. One finds also many allusions to world literature, from Roman writers to Jonathan Swift. Despite the pressures on his time by social action, he made the time to read and to study. And he was drawn to Jewish thinkers of all eras. He was as close to Rabbi Abraham Heschel as, if not closer than, he was to any kindred spirit in the cause of civil rights. And in *Strength to Love*, a collection of sermons as dedi-

cated to building the spirit of his people as to their social and political cause, he says: "The late Rabbi Joshua Liebman pointed out in an interesting chapter in his book *Peace of Mind* that we must love ourselves properly before we can adequately love others."

This genuine interest in and openness to Jewish history and thought should indicate to those who read Martin Luther King today that his was a mind and spirit that could have made tremendous strides in interfaith understanding on every intellectual, spiritual, and social level. There are still in his writings some stereotypes of Judaism that were, alas, inherited by the black church from centuries of anti-Jewish feeling in various Christian denominations. "The God of early Old Testament days was a tribal God and the ethic was tribal," King says in one sermon. "'Thou shalt not kill' meant 'Thou shalt not kill a fellow Israelite, but for God's sake, kill a Philistine.'" (*Strength to Love*, p. 17) Today Christian scholars and preachers are more aware that theories on the development of the so-called "Hebrew religion" more often reflect the prejudices of the scholars themselves, and that there is not one teaching about love in Christian scriptures that is not already found in the Hebrew Bible or in the Rabbinic writings. So, too, we occasionally find in King's sermons references to the Pharisees as the embodiment of hypocrisy and oppression, as we still find these in even the most so-called "liberal" Christian pulpits. Yet many important studies by both Jews and Christians in the twentieth century have shown that the thinking of the Pharisees, the pioneering and profound Sages of Judaism, is more of a foundation of Christianity and Islam than these daughter faiths are willing to admit. Christian scholars such as R. Travers Herford and George F. Moore and most recently Sanders have written some excellent books on religious thought showing that the Pharisees are wrongly condemned and that if Jesus did argue with them, he did so because he recognized their authority and method, and the dispute was basically a family squabble. If one side of all *our* family squabbles and business or even temple battles were to be published and canonized, we could *all* easily become symbols of evil and hypocrisy! The truth is that it is hard to say that Jesus argued with them at all, for the best of modern historical scholarship, which Dr. King accepted, regards the stories about Jesus in the Gospels to have been written long after his death by people angry at the Pharisees and Rabbis for not accepting their new religion.

Dr. Louis Finkelstein, the late chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote a classic study of *The Pharisees* in which, building upon the studies of renowned talmudist and Seminary scholar, Dr. Louis Ginzberg, he showed that the Pharisees actually led a religious revolution which emphasized the spiritual and economic contributions that the common man, and not the wealthy priestly family, can and should make to Jewish life. I am certain that had Dr. Martin Luther King lived, and had he been able to turn his attention to the elimination of religious prejudice as he had fought racial prejudices—and I am sure he would have expanded his intellectual and spiritual concerns in this direction—he would have sought to remove prejudices

against the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish religion; he would have been a major force in bringing about dialogue and understanding among Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Asian faiths and been the most effective force in any such dialogue.

For Dr. King's vision was, more than anything else, a spiritual vision articulated in spiritual terms. "Our world is a neighborhood," he said. "We must learn to live together as brothers (and sisters) or we will all perish as fools. For I submit, nothing will be done until people put their bodies and souls into this." (Memphis, April 3, 1968) In his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech he insisted, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality." And echoing Buber's philosophy, which we already saw cited in King's writings, Dr. King elaborated:

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered. (*Beyond Vietnam*, April 4, 1967)

Dr. King's vision was indeed a spiritual vision, rooted in biblical teachings, and it was communicated in three major ways: with great intellect and scholarship, something of which we have already seen; with powerful wit; and with deep psychological insight. His wit is unforgettable. "When poor people and Negroes are down in a depressing situation economically," he said, "we call it a social problem. When white people get massively unemployed, we call it a depression." (*A Proper Sense of Priorities*, February 6, 1968) Elsewhere Dr. King observed, "When scientific power outruns moral power, we end up with guided missiles and misguided men." (*Where Do We Go From Here*)

I could cite many more examples of Dr. King's wit, but I would simply emphasize that while his wit and intellect and scholarship were extraordinary, his understanding of people, of our fears and hopes, of our weaknesses and strengths, was nothing short of monumental. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" Dr. King confesses that he is not afraid of the word "tension." "I have earnestly opposed violent tension," he says, "but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth":

Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals would rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

Growth in society comes about when individuals can experience it by overcoming fear. Dr. King observes:

Envy, jealousy, a lack of self-confidence, a feeling of insecurity, and a haunting sense of inferiority are all rooted in fear. We do not envy people and then fear them; first we fear them and then we become jealous of them. Is there a cure for these annoying fears that pervert our personal lives? Yes, a deep and abiding commitment to the way of love. (*Strength to Love*, p. 114)

Growth in society comes about, also, when society realizes that truly seeking justice for one segment of that society is the winning of justice for everyone in that society. “The Negro must convince the white man,” Dr. King says, “that he seeks justice for both himself and the white man.” (*Ibid.*, p. 113)

And finally, growth in society comes about when people are willing to take a stand. In discussing the need to take a stand, Dr. King offers us not only profound insights into human psychology but a philosophy of history as well:

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. (“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”)

Notice Dr. King’s affirmation that human beings *can* become co-workers with God. This idea is, of course, a very Jewish one. Our ancient Rabbis described human beings as “partners with God in the work of creation.” They said that human beings reach the highest level of such partnership with God when they observe the Sabbath and when they judge fairly in the courts. Justice and equality are spiritual values, as spiritual as the observance of the Sabbath. And we of the Jewish tradition can therefore deeply identify with the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of blessed memory, that social justice requires a spiritual vision rooted in emphasis on human action, on human initiative, inspired by the God of the Prophets and Sages of old. That is why Dr. King was fond of observing that before Ezekiel could prophesy, he was told by God, “Stand upon thy feet, and I will speak to you.” (Cited in *Strength to Love*, p. 123) And that is why Hillel, some two thousand years before Dr. King and before America, urged us, “In a place where no one will take a stand, *you* take a stand.”