

A sermon delivered by Rabbi Misha Zinkow, senior rabbi at Temple Israel, at First Congregational Church, UCC, in Columbus, Ohio, on January 18, 2009.

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“Thoughts on Rabbi Abraham Heschel and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”

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A Jew, lonely in Poland, applied for a visa to emigrate to Israel. At last he went, only to discover that in Israel too, he was lonely. He concluded that it he'd better return to Poland, and so he received permission to travel back there to live.

Alas, his loneliness overwhelmed him and he returned to Israel. When this journey failed to relieve his loneliness, he requested yet again for approval to return to Poland. An annoyed Israeli immigration officer pointed out to the man, “You are lonely in Israel and return to Poland, unhappy in Poland, so swiftly come back here. So tell me sir, when are you happy?”

The man smiled and said, “That’s easy . . . I am happiest when I am traveling.”

Perhaps we are all in some way the lonely voyager, restless, struggling to be either physically or spiritually somewhere else along the arc of our personal journeys. It is the urge, the universal human yearning to grow, to seek an answer to the most fundamental of all questions, “What am I here for and how can I get there?”

Being alone on a spiritual journey is a characteristic common to the towering leaders of the Torah. Our patriarchs were lonely men of faith and vision, moving independently from one place to another, but never – and this is a central teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures – really alone.

Adam in the garden; Noah on the deck of his wooden ark watching as the world flooded; Abraham up and leaving his home; Jacob, fleeing his twin brother Esau, sleeping alone on the bank of a river; Joseph the brilliant dreamer trapped in a foreign prison; and Moses too, the subject of the Book of Exodus, the book the Jewish people opened this past week in our annual cycle of the re-telling of our master narrative.

Moses, growing up apart from his people, an outsider in the luxury of Pharaoh's palace, and an interloper when he walks among the slaves who are his brothers and his sisters. In this week's Torah reading, the portion called Va-eira, here is Moses, stuttering but resolute, standing small but tall and virtually alone before Pharaoh, speaking truth to power, demanding the freedom of his people.

Like his ancestors, like our ancestors, the sustaining power in his life, in their lives, was the profound realization that we are never truly alone. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Moses, Jesus and Muhammed were sustained by the awareness that they were part of a divine plan to repair the world.

In the opening moments of this week's Torah portion, a powerful relationship between Moses and God is revealed. Moses will discover personally God's power unleashed in the coming redemption of the people Israel: "God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am YHVH. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by my name YHVH. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. I have now heard the moaning of the Children of Israel because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered my covenant. Say, therefore to the Children of Israel, I am YHVH.'"

The rest of this story is well known to you. YHVH responds to the people's suffering, and eventually they flee the darkness of Egypt toward the light of freedom to re-establish their covenant with God. While we understand this Exodus as the right of a people to political freedom, it also teaches that in freedom a nation can pursue its journey to a sacred way of life.

The children of Israel were brought out of Egypt for a higher meaning and a purpose: to renew a covenant that was first forged between Abraham and God, created to “extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world.” (Genesis 18:19)

After generations of slavery, the Children of Israel were called to climb out from the pit of oppression, to renew hope, to deliver themselves against injustice, to encounter God at Mount Sinai, and to carry the message of Sinai, a message of justice and righteousness in their hearts and through the work of their hands then and throughout history.

We still live along the arc of history and the pursuit of justice, and this weekend, during which there is much symbolism in the confluence of several historic and history-making moments, let us pause to consider the path upon which we travel.

I have already addressed the Jewish liturgical context of this weekend – Moses’ response to God to partner with him to deliver a message of change, to unlock the bonds of slavery and to liberate a people so that they might fulfill their chosen destiny.

This weekend we mark the 36th anniversary of the death of the visionary thinker and activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Of course, we join as a nation in observing what would be the 80th birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. And finally, with great anticipation, we await the monumental moment on Tuesday when Barack Obama will be inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States. Needless to say, this is a weekend steeped in history and overflowing with possibility.

Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King were 20th century spiritual descendants of the prophet Moses. Two men from different countries, colors, backgrounds and faiths were joined in a spiritual kinship. The two great men walked arm in arm in pursuit of a just society.

Born in Poland and a refugee from Nazi Germany, Rabbi Heschel was brought to the United States to teach at two rabbinical seminaries. Martin Luther King, Heschel’s spiritual twin, was an

American descendant of slaves, a compassionate protector of the oppressed, charismatic orator, writer and theologian.

They met in Chicago in 1963, when Heschel denounced discrimination against blacks at the first National Conference of Religion and Race. These two great men developed a genuine friendship, and two years later, in 1965, Dr. King asked

Rabbi Heschel to join him in Selma, where they led the march, side-by-side, to Montgomery to protest the insidious racism that poisoned America and humiliated its African-American citizens.

Heschel believed that prayer should never be restricted to the sanctuaries of religious institutions. He wrote, "Let the spirit of prayer interfere in the affairs of man. Prayer is private, a service of the heart; but let concern and compassion, born out of prayer, dominate public life. Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and ruin pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, and falsehoods. Liturgy must be a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision."

Expressive of the integration of prayer and action, after the Alabama experience, he famously declared: "When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying." Heschel believed that faith in the goodness and oneness of God is powerfully expressed not only with the language of the heart poured out in synagogues, churches and mosques, but through the purposeful actions of feet, hands, and spine.

King and Heschel were united in the kinship of suffering and the shared vision of great dreams. Describing Heschel as "one of the great men of our age, a truly great prophet," Martin Luther King declared: "He has been with us in many struggles. I remember marching from Selma to Montgomery, how he stood at my side. . . . I remember very well when we were in Chicago for the conference . . . to a great extent his speech inspired clergymen of all faiths to do something they had not done before."

Rabbi Heschel summarized the preciousness of human existence in a striking aphorism: “There is no human being who does not carry a treasure in his soul; a moment of insight, a memory of love, a dream of excellence, a call to worship. . . . It takes three things to attain a sense of significant being: God, a soul, and a moment. And the three are always there. Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.”

And this weekend we celebrate the sacred life and being of Dr. King. Who among us cannot quote almost verbatim from the profound words the prophetic leader preached: “We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.” It was moral grandeur and courageous spirit that brought Heschel and King together, and the two men were instrumental in demonstrating diverse communities toiling together to create a grand inclusive society.

At the same time, they were aware of the looming threat on Dr. King’s life. After the assassination, Rabbi Heschel, a speaker at his friend’s funeral, remembered him saying, “Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us . . . his mission is sacred . . . I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the influence of Dr. King.”

Like Moses, Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel were girded with spiritual audacity. They held steadfast to the belief that God makes demands of us, that we must perpetually strive be somewhere else, to grow continuously in our effectiveness as God’s world-repairing partners.

Heschel wrote that the Hebrew Bible is not the history of the Jewish people, but the story of God’s quest for the righteous man. And it was sacred chutzpah that moved Dr. King to say: “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.”

King’s vision echoed the covenant of justice cut at Mount Sinai and the message of the Hebrew prophets. And it is the hope

we fervently embrace this cold January morning, as this nation stands on the precipice of an uncertain tomorrow, when as lonely individuals and divine partners in faith we long to be somewhere else, to journey forward in one collective march toward a life of meaning and purpose, a community of compassion and fairness and a world of enduring peace.

Indeed, Dr. Martin Luther King first blazed the path that Mr. Barack Obama now walks along toward the Oval office. Dr. King wrote, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." As a country, we now place our faith in a new leader who we pray possesses the capacity and the vision to renew the covenant of justice the Holy One first established with Abraham and Sarah, lonely, faithful, pioneers. It was a covenant remembered when YHVH revealed himself to the shepherd Moses, and renewed again at Mount Sinai.

We are fully prepared to place our confidence in a man who must lead our nation up that staircase toward unseen higher potentials. On Tuesday, we place a precious reserve of trust in the hands of our new president, in the vision of a man who, we pray has inherited the ethics and vision of Moses, the moral grandeur of Rabbi Heschel and the tenacity and faith of Dr. King.

Despite overwhelming challenges, he has given the people of our country and the nations of the world a measure of optimism. His words have electrified millions of Americans, and have stirred me personally. He will place his hand on the Bible Abraham Lincoln used at his inauguration in 1861. He will take the oath of office with the support of a longing nation willing still to renew the vision of its founders. President-elect Obama has revealed in our land a belief rooted in the beginning of time, in the book of Genesis, that all people are created *btzelem Elohim* – in the image of God.

Allow me to expansively quote Mr. Obama: "I'm talking about Hope – Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope! In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation. A belief in things not seen. A belief that there are better days ahead. I believe that we have a righteous wind

at our backs and that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices, and meet the challenges that face us.

“But always remember that, no matter what obstacles stand in our way, nothing can stand in the way of the power of millions of voices calling for change. . . . When we've been told we're not ready or that we shouldn't try or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. Yes, we can. Yes, we can. It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can. It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail towards freedom through the darkest of nights: Yes, we can.

“It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness: Yes, we can. It was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot, a president who chose the moon as our new frontier, and a king who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promised land: Yes, we can, to justice and equality. Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can.”

Moses could not stand still in the desert while his people suffered in the slave pits. Dr. King, a relentless dreamer courageously enabled a nation to imagine the unrealized possibilities of a spiritually elevated world, and inspires us still to be architects and builders of a just community.

His vision of justice echoed one of the most sacred calls of the Torah: *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you and your children may live. Never be complacent, never ever stand still, for there is always work to be done, to pursue *tzedek*, justice, with passionate tenacity. Never stand still, because we gotta get somewhere else.

But in 48 hours, we will indeed stand still, for just one sacred moment, to witness the peaceful passage of power, a transfer into the hands of our nation's first black chief executive. What a sacred moment indeed.

But when the sun rises Wednesday morning, and President Obama walks alone into the Oval office, we must march arm-in-arm to work with him.

Let us pray with our hands, our feet and our sacrifices. Our new president must not walk alone on his journey to lead us somewhere else. To reach a land of promise we all shoulder responsibility. Let us celebrate our individual impulses to move toward somewhere else. Let us set free our deepest and most noble collective aspirations to journey to a brighter day. Yes, we can revive hope. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world.

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