

Reverend King and the Rabbis, Fifty Years Later

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Fifty years ago last month, ten days before he was assassinated, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., appeared before the national convention of the Rabbinical Assembly, the annual gathering of Conservative rabbis.¹ It turned out to be Rev. King's last interview. He was greeted, for the first time in his life he said, by the singing of "We Shall Overcome" in Hebrew -- אָנוּ נִתְגַבֵּר *Anu nitgaber*. Deep in my heart, I do believe -- the rabbis sang:

אָנִי מְאֲמִין בְּאֵמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה, נִתְגַבֵּר בְּבוֹא הַיּוֹם

Ani ma'amin be'emunah shlaymah, nitgaber b'vo hayom.

Rev. King was introduced by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Indeed, he was supposed to be just a few weeks later at Heschel's house for the Seder.

Questions had been gathered from the convention, and they were presented to Rev. King by Rabbi Everett Gendler, who had been the catalyst for Heschel's own now-famous participation in the Selma march five years earlier. Listen to what the questions were about:

- the president of the United States
- extremist vs. more moderate approaches to social change, and which do Blacks support on the whole
- what integration really would look like, politically and economically
- the relationship between racism and poverty
- anti-Semitism and anti-Israel rhetoric in the Black community
- and finally -- what one thing would Rev. King most want the rabbis and their communities to do right now, beyond what they called "simple tutoring and palliative efforts"

Fifty years after Rev. King was taken from us, and we are still asking the same questions.

1. <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/resources-ideas/cj/classics/1-4-12-civil-rights/conversation-with-martin-luther-king.pdf>, also in James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1968), pp. 657-679.

I don't think that in and of itself means that we are stuck in the same place, that we have not moved in fifty years. As the arc of history moves toward justice, in fits and starts and slides backward, there are always certain running themes, questions of values and basic truths about society and ethics, and we *should* keep asking them, return to them. That's what our weekly Shabbat gatherings are for -- to figure out the timeless questions beneath the news of the week, so we can ask them and apply some answers in the week to come.

But there is no question that a great leader and a great religious teacher was stolen from us in Memphis fifty years ago, at the age of 39. I call him Rev. King and not Dr. King because he was a teacher about the prophets and the ethics of the Bible to Jews as well as Christians. His core teachings are important to share, to label and present on many occasions. They have depth and they have significance because he was not only steeped in faith, steeped in the prophets, but also steeped in the detail work of a movement and of politics. So Rev. King's Torah is a kind of steel sharpened and polished not like the Talmud envisions by argument among scholars, but by the test of the world and its Pharaohs.

The Rev. King who spoke to the Rabbinical Assembly fifty years ago was sober and somber, more so than the King who spoke at the Lincoln Memorial so famously. Where 1963 was a year of protest and demonstrations, organized by a pretty united civil rights leadership -- 1968 was a year with violence and riots, controlled by factions or by no one. There was no talk of dreams before the Rabbinical Assembly that day; the goal was harder to see in a single focus. But the enduring truth of the man and the consistency of his teachings were still there, and I want to tell you what we should be learning right now from that Rev. King.

There was a quote from the prophets that he frequently invoked, from the book of Amos: "Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (5:34). It's not just beautiful poetry, or just one of any number of exhortations to justice and righteousness in the Bible.

To the ancient Israelites and their prophets, water could be one of two things. It could be rain, scarce and inconsistent, whose every drop had to be caught and channeled, or gathered in cisterns, in a hard fight against nature. Or it could be a never-stopping river, fed from the mountains or from deep within the earth; or the waves of the vast sea -- the most natural and easy and dependable thing in the world.

Some people believe that justice is against human nature and the nature of society. Plenty of people and plenty of thinkers. Rev. King believed that justice and righteousness were built into the world, that in the nature of things they simply flow and gush as simply as gravity, rush into every corner to give it life. That's a proclamation of faith. That's not a description of a reality -- it was the opposite of the reality he was fighting against. But Rev King's fundamental lesson was that justice simply is the true nature of the world, no matter what we see. It takes a deep faith to hold onto that, it took a deep faith for him to hold onto that despite all he had experienced and seen.

And these same words of Amos were also his view of power -- that there is a natural power of justice that cannot be matched by any opponent or any earthly power.

This verse, in fact, comes at the end of a passage in which Amos describes the hard work that oppressors have to do, the labor they have to go through to twist justice, to feast on bribes, to look away from the poor and drive them out from their communities. And the hard work that it takes to present yourself as religious before God, bringing sacrifices and organizing celebrations, when you are the author of so much injustice. Amos is saying: *this* is unnatural. The power it takes to do these things is a wearying power, a deadening power, a power that spends itself and takes us away from each other and away from the divine.

“Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Rev. King was teaching us about power. First of all, we *need* to think in terms of power, of acting powerfully and creating real power, because righteousness needs to *feel* and to be experienced like a mighty stream. Power is not a dirty word. He asked us to believe in the power available to those who will be just and link arms together, to roll ahead and stream forward mightily.

In front of the rabbis that day, Rev. King talked about the upcoming Poor People's March, and talked about power:

I can't see the answer in riots. On the other hand, I can't see the answer in tender supplications for justice. I see the answer in an alternative to both of these, and that is militant non-violence that is massive enough, that is attention-getting enough to dramatize the problems, that will be as attention-getting as a riot... And this is what we hope to do in Washington through our movement.

And he pointed out to the rabbis their power, the prophetic power of their pulpits:

...the religious community, being the chief moral guardian of the over-all community should really take the primary responsibility in dealing with this problem of racism, which is largely attitudinal.

It is time for us to claim this power that we have, as religious leaders and religious people. This should be the easiest kind of power, the power of our speech and the clarity of words that distinguish what is just from what is unjust.

In front of the rabbis, Rev. King was in one of the toughest times of his life and his work. He was embattled within his community, and it was an angry time and a fearful time. And Rev. King can teach us something about anger and fear. And I think again that it was the prophet Amos that he was drawing from, because Amos was at times an angry prophet.

Rev. King taught and spoke in a way that addressed power, anger and fear from the vantage point of faith, and particularly the vantage point of love.

Anger on its own is destructive and divisive, and violent. Anger with love is simply a station on the path to justice. Anger with love, Rev. King taught by his words and his actions, anger with love is indignation. That becomes fuel for righteousness and for service. And somewhere along that way, anger is transformed even into joy and into song. And then comes another phase of anger, but it is again just a station, through love, on the way to righteousness and service.

The prophet Amos began in fear -- he compared himself to someone reacting to the roar of a nearby lion. But he transformed that into a message about the cleansing waters of justice, and into a message of love, challenging love.

In front of the rabbis, Rev. King talked about anger unmoored from faith and love in both the Nixon campaign and the Black Power leadership. Today we see of course that same kind of anger and fear unmoored from any faith and any love, in the president and the destructive part of his following, and in too many leaders of the protest movements as well.

We need to look at our own anger and fear, and channel it back through faith, into love and commitment and service.

Justice, power, fear, anger -- Rev. King's teachings about all of these are a roadmap we need for today. We need first of all to see the justice issues behind the suffering of people in our country, in our city and region. To say it straight and simple -- a city with pockets of affluence and pockets of poverty like ours is not a just city.

We need to believe, even so, that justice is how God's creation is built, that it is the nature of justice to flow like a mighty stream.

When we are angry at those who deny the possibility of a just society, or who argue that the steps of change are not realistic, we need to transform that anger into love and service to those who are suffering.

And we need to believe that success will come from power rooted in nonviolence, in true words magnified by prophetic voices and mass presence and mass action -- the truest real power in the world.

Deep in my heart, I do believe . אָנִי מְאֲמִין בְּאֱמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה *Ani ma'amin be-emunah shlaymah.* There is so much yet to do, and so much yet that we can do, to repair and heal our society. We were privileged, as Jews and as rabbis, to be partners so often with Rev. King, and to have him speak directly to us. May we continue to learn from him, *zichrono livracha*, that his memory may bless us and through us bless many others.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!