

## **Dvar Torah for MLK Day 2014: Standing Up for Freedom Together**

Congregation Kehilat Shalom, Belle Mead, NJ, January 17, 2014

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Every January, we observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day. We tell the story of a hero who represented a struggle for justice, who was willing to sacrifice his life for equality.

In 1963, during the March on Washington, King delivered the “I Have a Dream” speech by which we best remember him. He said:

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

And, King said, “when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*”

Yesterday morning, as I was getting ready for school, I overheard an interview on NPR with John Ridley, the man who wrote the screenplay for the film ‘12 Years a Slave’. Ridley spoke compellingly about how the film is a testament to how far America has come, from a nation of slavery to a nation of freedom, to a nation that lives out the ideals of King’s dream.

I wish with all my heart that I could agree with Ridley’s words. I wish that King’s dream of racial equality was so fully realized in our day and age that King’s message could seem like an anachronism, rather than a still-relevant call to justice. But I don’t believe that King’s dreams have been fully realized, because I have heard the dreams of other men – men who, because of accidents of birth, accidents of race and class, were deprived of their freedom.

Before I began rabbinical school in Philadelphia, I lived in New Orleans for a few years. I worked at a nonprofit that was founded by a man named John Thompson, or JT. JT is a small man, with a shaved head and a goatee, and a frenetic, constant energy. Sometimes this energy of his made him a little hard to work with. We worked together in an open concept office, and, dozens of times each day, he would pace back and forth in front of my desk, spitting grand ideas about our organization’s next big project, or our next big grant.

JT always paced out the same number of steps – five steps forward, five steps back, forward and back, forward and back. And it took me a few months to realize why JT always took 5 steps, no more.

He took five steps because that was how big his cell on death row was. JT is an exoneree. He spent 18 in prison – 14 of those years on death row – because he was wrongfully convicted of a murder and armed robbery that he didn't commit. During his almost 2 decades in prison, JT would pace his six foot by nine foot cell – “about the size of your average bathroom”, he'd say, back and forth, back and forth. And *he* would dream of getting out, of getting free.

JT was sentenced to death in 1985. In 1999, weeks before he was scheduled to be executed, investigators with the Innocence Project of New Orleans found blood-type evidence that exonerated JT. The prosecutors at JT's original trial had thought that they had destroyed all the evidence that would show definitively that JT wasn't the perpetrator. But they'd forgotten to destroy one microfilm – and this saved JT from being executed by the state of Louisiana.

When JT was finally exonerated in 2003, he was reunited with his mother, who'd had 3 strokes while he was in prison. He was reunited with his two sons. And, less than 2 months after he gained his dream of freedom, he married his childhood friend Laverne. JT also founded Resurrection After Exoneration, the organization I worked at with him, an organization that helps other exonerees in the South once they've been released from prison. Because JT isn't an anomaly. Over 1,000 people – mostly poor, black men – have been exonerated across the US over the past few decades.

JT, and his many fellow exonerees, are part of an American system that is broken. Its brokenness extends beyond the fact that innocent people spend decades in prison, or innocent people even get put to death. Its brokenness lies in statistics that would be shocking if they weren't the status quo. Between 1987 and 2007, the US tripled its prison population, even while crime rates went down. The US incarcerates more of its citizens per capita than any other country in the world – more than Russia, more than China, more than any of the countries that we consider to be oppressive regimes. In the United States today, one in nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34 is in prison or jail – a much higher percentage than their white counterparts. Black men serve 20 percent longer than white men convicted of the same crimes. And, as we saw this past summer, a white man who shoots a black teenager armed with candy and a drink goes free.

Across the United States today, more than 7 million Americans are in prison, jail, or on probation. Prisons are being built by private companies, and judges and politicians are *expected* to sentence a certain number of people in order to fill the bunks of new prisons being built for profit. Locking people up has become a money-making venture.

All these statistics, all these facts, can feel like stones, burying us under a weight of hopelessness and immobility. But King, that visionary, refused to allow us the luxury of not taking action, of giving up before even beginning. At the March on Washington, 51 years ago, King announced:

“We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.”

Today, in 2014, Jewish congregations and communities across the United States are reigniting King's struggle for civil rights in its newest incarnation – taking on the criminal injustice system. Tomorrow, in honour of MLK weekend, Mishkan Shalom, a Reconstructionist synagogue in Philadelphia, is joining with other synagogues and churches across Pennsylvania to host a screening of the film *Broken On all Sides* – an award-winning documentary about the causes of mass incarceration in the US. A synagogue in Woodstock, New York has formed a working group to figure out how to learn about the justice system and lobby political leaders for change. Across the country, in synagogues and churches, groups of people like us are reading and discussing Michelle Alexander's hugely important book “*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*”. There is a movement starting – a movement that refuses and refutes the tranquilizing drug of gradualism, or the desolate valley of hopelessness, or the idea that this is someone else's problem.

As Jews, we have seeded the world with the idea that we are made in God's image, that each of us, black, brown and white, Jewish or gentile, innocent or guilty, have God's light inside of us. This teaching is the birthright that we have shared with the world. And now, it's time to honour the corollary of that birthright – that we *work* for justice, even when it seems hopeless, even when crime and prison seem far away, even when the dreams of freedom of men who pace 6 foot by 9 foot cells seem far from our own, quieter dreams. **I** have a dream that we will put aside our complacency and recognize that we cannot drink in our freedom while communities of Americans across this country are dying of thirst.

We need to believe that we can work for real change.

Martin Luther King said: “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will all be free one day.” Ken ye'hi ratzon.