

D'var Torah Bo, 2015, in honor of MLK day

Prepared by Judith Burstyn and Dorith Steinberg

DORITH: We chose today to share with you the words of others who have written on the themes of Exodus and social justice.

DORITH: The Velveteen Rabbi, Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, was ordained by Aleph in 2011. She is rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, a 100 household community.
(<http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2015/01/vaera-freedom-and-reverend-martin-luther-king.html>)

"This week we move deeper into our people's central story: we were enslaved to a Pharaoh in Egypt, and God brought us out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. This year, our reading of this holy story fell on the weekend when we observed Martin Luther King Day."

"The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr -- *alav hashalom* / peace be upon him -- was a man in the mold of Moses. He worked tirelessly to end the injustice of segregation. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. He organized nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama, which attracted national attention because television crews captured the brutal police response. He dared to dream of a world redeemed in which the evils of racism would be a thing of the past."

"As Jews, we twice a year recount the story of how we were slaves to a Pharaoh in Egypt -- during the weekly round of Torah readings, and at the Passover seder. We also thank God for our liberation from slavery in daily prayer and in the Friday night kiddush. The Civil Rights Movement made big progress. MLK and others payed the ultimate price for this progress. And there is a lot of work to do yet."

"Our tradition has something to say about unfinished labor. In Pirkei Avot, a collection of rabbinic wisdom, we read the saying of Rabbi Tarfon: it is not incumbent on us to finish the task, but neither are we free to desist from it. We can't stop trying; we can't give up hope. It was Martin Luther King who wrote that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." *Aleinu* -- it's up to us -- to help to see that vision through."

JUDITH: Rabbi George Gittleman, Congregation Shomrei Torah, Santa Rosa CA; "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Exodus" sermon for MLK Day, 2013

"What makes the Exodus narrative so compelling? For me it is the idea that no one is caught up in the straightjacket of history; even a slave nation can become a free people. The other essential element of the narrative is the idea that God "hears" the plight of the oppressed. What takes Her so long, I don't know, but the delay in "hearing" and "acting" does not diminish for me the idea that the God of Israel deeply cares about justice, identifying the most vulnerable -- no one is more vulnerable than a slave -- as the most worthy of attention. These big ideas embedded in the Exodus narrative come alive in the sermons and other writings of Dr. King."

JUDITH: Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., excerpts from “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution” a sermon delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington DC, March 31, 1968 before the March on Washington.

“Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”

“Secondly, we are challenged to eradicate the last vestiges of racial injustice from our nation. I must say this morning that racial injustice is still the black man’s burden and the white man’s shame.”

“Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right.”

“We must come to see that the roots of racism are very deep in our country, and there must be something positive and massive in order to get rid of all the effects of racism and the tragedies of racial injustice.”

“And I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion. And it will be the kind of soul force brought into being as a result of this confrontation that I believe will make the difference.”

JUDITH: Susannah Heschel, Eli Black professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth University and daughter of Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jan. 2015
(<http://www.jta.org/2015/01/18/news-opinion/opinion/op-ed-what-selma-meant-to-the-jews>)

“My father felt that the prophetic tradition of Judaism had come alive at Selma. He said that King told him it was the greatest day in his life, and my father said that he was reminded at Selma of walking with Hasidic rebbes in Europe. Such was the spiritual atmosphere of the day.”

“When he returned, he famously said, ‘For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not

kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”

DORITH: Audre Lourde, was a Caribbean-American writer, radical feminist, and civil rights activist. As a black lesbian her writings added a unique perspective on issues of civil rights, feminism and oppression.

“Without community, there is no liberation... but community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”

JUDITH: To conclude, the words again of Rabbi Gittleman

“Having once been slaves we must be sensitive to the plight of the oppressed, having tasted freedom we must never settle for bondage of any kind.”

DORITH: Brief summary of the Parashah – for before the readings

In this Torah portion, God sends the eighth and ninth plagues, locusts and darkness

Pharaoh still refuses to free the Israelite slaves.

God tells Moses that the tenth plague will be killing all the firstborn Egyptians.

God commands each Israelite home to slaughter a lamb and spread the blood on their doorposts, in order to protect their firstborns.

After the death of the firstborn, Pharaoh demands that the Israelites leave.