

History Points to the Future

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Fifty years ago and a few days, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered what turned out to be his final speech, "I Have Been to the Mountaintop," in Memphis Tennessee. He began with an affirmation that history was not confined to the past. King understood that he was living history, and that history looked toward the future. From his words during that prophetic night:

If I were standing at the beginning of time with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, 'Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?' I would take my mental flight by Egypt, and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt ... across the Red Sea, through the wilderness, on toward the Promised Land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there.

I would move on by Greece ... And I would see Socrates, Euripides, and Aristophanes. ...

I would go on even to the great heyday of the Roman empire. ... I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance. ... And I would watch Martin Luther as he tacks his ninety-five theses on the door of the Church of Wittenberg. ... I would come up even to 1863 and watch a vacillating president by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. But I wouldn't stop there. ...

Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy."

His point was that history is more than a record of what happened. History lives. History dreams. Memory inspires the future.

That was the message of the Haggadah last week: "*Lo et avotenu*, It was not just our ancestors who were redeemed by the Holy One, but rather we were redeemed along with them, as Deuteronomy states, '*V'otanu hotzi misham*, God took **us** out from there in order to bring **us** and to give **us** the land sworn to our ancestors.'"

It was the message of our Torah reading today, describing our societal responsibilities to the poor and disadvantaged. The Hebrew slave who was sold to you would serve for six years; and in the seventh year, he was to be set free. "And when you set him free," says the Torah, "do not let him go empty handed. Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor and vat. You shall remember that you were a slave in the Land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you. Therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today."

It was the message of our Haftarah from Isaiah: “*V’hayah ba-yom ha-hu*, It will happen on that day that the stock of Jesse shall become a standard to all people. ... In that day, the Lord will redeem the remnants of His people a second time.” How do we know that redemption will come? Because it came in Egypt, and history lives on through the future.

This is the message of Yizkor: “*Yizkor Elohim*, May God remember my loved ones; *hineni nodev*, as I pledge *tzedakah* to perpetuate their ideals.” I look to the future, that my memories of joy and pain and loss might inspire me to make a difference for others.

Our recitation of Yizkor today coincides with a series of other commemorations. It is 50 years since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, and yet we know that his dream is not yet fulfilled. In a country that boasts the world’s greatest gap between rich and poor, unequal access to health care, violence in our cities and in our schools, latent racism that lurks just beyond the limits of the law, the challenges of documented and undocumented immigration, we know we have to do more.

Not just our ancestors. *V’zakharta*, You shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt. History points to the future.

On Wednesday evening, I hope you will join me in lighting the yellow memorial candles that our Men’s Club sent out for Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. We remember the heroism of Mordecai Anilevitch and his brave followers, as well as the impossibility of their mission to defeat the Nazis. We mourn the destruction of the Jews of Europe, remember the displaced persons camps filled with Jewish refugees who had no place to go.

And then we look to the future. It is no accident that Yom HaShoah falls exactly one week before Yom HaZikaron, Memorial Day for Israel’s fallen soldiers; and Yom HaZikaron leads directly into Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day. Memories of destruction lead to celebrations of heroism, renewal, and the pioneering spirit. History is not confined to the past.

And we know that the dream to be a free people in our own land is also incomplete. Israel is challenged from abroad by terrorism, delegitimization, and the existential threat of an aspiring nuclear power bent on our destruction. And there are domestic threats— a prime minister being investigated for corruption, a dysfunctional political system that makes governing all but impossible. (Last week, the Prime Minister’s Office announced a plan to spare 38,000 African asylum seekers from forced deportation; but within hours, Prime Minister Netanyahu suspended the plan in response to pressure from the most extreme members of his governing coalition.) I speak often about the lack of religious pluralism, which excludes our brand of worship from Israel’s holy sites, bans our rabbis from participating in conversion or marriage, and denies the 70% of Israelis who claim to be secular from having a viable, non-Orthodox option for religious expression.

We remember. We celebrate. And we know that the dream is not complete. *Hineni nodev*, I pledge to do more to make a difference, as history lives on.

And there is a universal element as well to our memorial cry of “Never Again.” On Saturday, May 12, our congregation will welcome Senator Ben Cardin to speak during services. Senator Cardin will speak about a bill he is co-sponsoring to call attention to the suffering of the Rohingya in Myanmar. The Rohingya’s presence in Burma dates back to the 15th century. They have suffered discrimination and persecution since at least the end of World War II, with increased persecution by successive military governments since the late 1970s. In the last two years, the military has waged what we would recognize as pogroms against the Rohingya, forcing an estimated 640,000 to flee to Bangladesh, where they have been interned as refugees.

There aren’t any great solutions to this crisis. But as a people that understands the power of memory, we do have to pay more attention. I am proud to have worked with our member David Schoenbaum to author a resolution of the Rabbinical Assembly, which has been approved and will soon be published. In our own synagogue, we are working to create educational opportunities so that we can all learn more ... and do more.

“V’zakharta ki eved ha-yita b’eret mitzrayim, You shall remember that you were slaves in the Land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today.”

In this hour of memory; as we recall the values of our loved ones who have forever touched our lives; as we remember the martyrs who perished in the Holocaust, the heroes who fought in this country for civil rights, and those who fought in the Land of our Ancestors for the establishment of the State of Israel; as we observe the last day of our Festival of Freedom, let us affirm that our memories point to the future.

And let us pray:

Yizkor Elohim, May God remember our loved ones who created and enhanced the past

Hinenu nod’vim, And may we pledge to make a difference for the future

V’haya ba-yom ha-hu, that it may come to pass on that day

That all people will be free

All people will be blessed

All people will be safe.

And all people might mimic the words of Your prophet:

Od’kha Adonai, I give thanks to the Lord ... my strength and my might

Va-y’hi li li-shu-ah, that God has been my deliverance.

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameah.