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MARTIN LUTHER KING AND INAUGURATION SHABBAT
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What an extraordinary confluence of events this Shabbat represents: Each year, when we gather with family and friends at our Passover Seder tables, in essence, we are re-enacting the narrative of today's Torah portion – the Exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. That message of God's gift of freedom not only to us, the Jewish people, but by extension to all God's children was surely pivotal in inspiring Dr. Martin Luther King, whose birthday we are marking this weekend. And finally – as we are all aware – especially here in our Nation's Capital – it is only two days until the re-inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States – the only African-American to have served in that distinguished office over the course of more than two hundred years of our history.

It would be relatively easy to think of the Exodus as a one-time moment of supreme drama that occurred long ago. In a compelling book called Exodus and Revolution, Michael Walzer, who is Professor Emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, argues passionately that the Exodus became the classic paradigm shaping much of Western political thought and action. He describes an experience he had in a small Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama in the early 1960's, where he listened to a sermon as the preacher made the "going out" from Egypt exceptionally visceral – "expounding on its contemporary analogues."
(Exodus and Revolution, p.3)

Professor Walzer develops the thesis that numerous examples abound in which the Exodus motif becomes the springboard for addressing the injustices of our world. From Puritan England in the 17th century to the American civil rights movement, those memories of the Exodus shaped political change . . . with a conviction that tyranny must be resisted . . . "that there is a better place, a promised land – and that the only way to get from here to there is by joining together and marching."
(Exodus and Revolution p.149)

A colleague, Rabbi Lilly Kaufman, speaking about Dr. Martin Luther King put it this way: "Dr. King had faith in a few great things: one was the essential American dream. Not a middle-class American dream, or an upper-class, a working poor or an impoverished-class American dream which lifts up those bowed down . . . (but rather) . . . the abiding American dream of liberty and justice for all."

Dr. King asked of God in 1964: ". . . grant that we will always reach out for that which is high – realizing that we are made for the stars, created for the everlasting, born for eternity."

I have occasionally spoken about one of my most vivid childhood recollections: that of my father, who was a rabbi, heading off for the March on Washington in August 1963 – just about 50 years ago. I wanted him to take me along – and always regretted that I was not there with him – but I do know that my dad returned home galvanized – ready to roll up his sleeves – which he did for the cause of civil rights in our then heavily segregated suburban community.

Yes . . . we have surely made much progress in American society since the 1960's – but tell that to women who are still struggling to get beyond the "glass ceiling" that stifles their

professional opportunities – or tell that to children who get up each morning without breakfast, because there is simply not enough money for food – or to immigrants who fear that they will be deported – or to gays, whose sexual orientation evokes prejudice and hostility – or to those who feel endangered by the incessant gunfire in their neighborhoods.

Why do we sit each year at our Seder table? – Because deep down we know . . . we believe . . . that the values of religion are not separate from life – but are at the very heart of life.

That message extracted from the Book of Exodus exemplifies the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King.

America is a mosaic of so many who are different – by color, by gender, by faith, by ethnicity . . . and the work of freedom is far from complete.

In the spirit of our Parasha of this Shabbat – in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King and in the spirit of new hope that an Inauguration always brings to the political landscape, may we continue to move forward with conviction, energy and vision – “for if not now, then when?”

(Avot 1:14)