

***Temple B'rith Kodesh-Mt. Olivet Baptist Church Exchange
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend
January 17, 2021/4 Shevat 5781
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At the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the culmination of what we call the 5 Books of Torah, the Sacred Teachings, God brings Moses up to the peak of Mt. Nebo. We are told that despite his age of 120 years old, his “eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated.”

From that mountaintop, God allows Moses to see all of the land.

We gather together today, not at the mountaintop, but still able to see across the land. Today, I want us to pause and focus on that vision...to resolve that we will nurture and lovingly draw out that vision. I want us to take this moment to challenge ourselves to pursue a vision of our country as it can be—as it should be.

We are not on a peak, but in many ways are at a low and challenging moment. And so, I quote from the psalms, Psalm 118: 5, “Out of the depths, in distress, I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and brought me relief. The Lord is on my side, I have no fear...”.

But there is fear. We look across this great land and must recognize that there is hatred running wild, terror being perpetrated in our hallowed halls.

On January 6, District of Columbia Police Officer Michael Fanone was lying on the floor of the US Capitol. In uniform, he had been injured by fellow Americans. And then he heard the shout, "Grab his gun! Kill him with his own gun!"

Miraculously, Fanone wasn't killed that day. But I join him in crying out in despair, and pray that God will answer and bring us relief.

Let us remember the charge that we have heard at this very moment in American history in past generations. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated, he proclaimed, "This great nation will endure...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself..."

Abraham Lincoln, at his second inaugural in 1865, declared, "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds..."

This is a moment to begin to heal our wounds. Let us find a way to rise up out of the depths, and let us not be paralyzed by fear.

We can do this with small, simple, important steps.

We need to do the hard work of building relationships across lines of identity. If we are to be the *United* States of America, then we can't persist in living separately.

We've said this over and over, and it may sound like just so many words...platitudes.

But in this moment, I feel that there is an urgent and profound opportunity. This is a time to once and for all say, "No more!" "Never again!"

Kill him with his own gun is a cry of desperation. It is a profanity that arises out unchecked, unanswered hatred.

Kill him with his own gun is a bloodcurdling war cry, one that we must negate with audacious words of hope.

Turn your guns into ploughshares.

Turn your hatred for the other into curiosity about the other.

Love your neighbor as yourself...and we're all neighbors.

To borrow from Dickens, we can't live with a tale of two countries. In our own community, we must work so that every school in Monroe County provides educational excellence. Every neighborhood must have equal access to healthy food and quality healthcare.

And every single person, no matter the color of their skin, must not be afraid to walk down the street or get behind the wheel.

How can we make this a reality?

We must aggressively and audaciously pursue integration.

We know that the memory of redlining is a painful and close reality. I'm not proposing that we all pick up and move in together.

But.

When we go out to eat (or get take out, during these pandemic times!), go to different neighborhoods. The food is wonderful and the social impact is important. There are directories of black owned business and women owned businesses, and we can build up our community when we are deliberate in using them.

For our two congregations and beyond: we can really, truly get to know one another. Let's create coffees, conversation circles, and joint projects.

If the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, then let us not be afraid to stretch and grow and change the comfortable realities of our lives that have led to such uncomfortable and tragic realities.

The events in Washington didn't happen in a vacuum. January 6 wasn't an isolated event and millions of people either looked the other way or looked on approvingly. Of course, there were many for whom this was a turning point, but we have a lot of work to do.

Let me return to that moment on Mt. Nebo. Moses, the great prophet, the servant of God, is singled out in this way: "He knew God *panim el panim*, face to face."

Right now, we need to do this: to truly see one another, face to face....to break down the divisions and know one another, face to face.

Earlier in the biblical narrative, we read of the reunion of Jacob and Esau. After decades apart, the brothers embrace and Jacob says, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God."

This is the vision we must pursue, from the mountaintops and the low valleys. How can we see the face of the other? How can we see holiness in the face of the other? How can we create a sense that we are united in pursuit of a common goal, that we rid our country of hatred and division?

At the opposite end of the National Mall from Capitol Hill, Rabbi Joachim Prinz stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial alongside Dr. King during the March on Washington. Many of you have heard me share his words before:

“When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.”

Today, we can’t remain silent. When the cry goes out “kill him with his own gun!”, we must answer “No!”

We must not remain silent. We must speak up and draw closer to one another. Let us rise up out of the valleys and reach for the mountaintops by speaking words of love, words that speak of our stance that we will not rest until there is equality and dignity for all.

Dr. King spoke about silence himself. “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

What I ask you today is this: speak up. Raise your voices with compassion and curiosity, and let’s build bridges together.

Think of our words as building a path that will lift us out of the valley, all the way to the mountaintop.

How are you?

Really. How are you?

How can I help?

Let me understand your point of view.

I want to learn from you.

You are my neighbor.

I want you to have every blessing, every privilege, and every opportunity I have for myself.

These are the words that will allow us to heal our wounds.
These are the words that will enable us to abolish fear and hate.

These are the words that will be the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream, about the "fierce urgency of now", and our ability to "to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice."

I pray that today is a day along that path. I pray that Wednesday will be a day along that path.

I pray that these will be times that move us ever higher, out of the depths and into the heights of a better world.

Eternal God of Blessing, let us see that path.

Eternal God of Blessing, lead us on that path.

Eternal God of Blessing, heal us and shelter us now. With your help, God, our vigor is unabated, and we have within us all we need to bring healing and hope to our country and to the world.