

**Temple B'rith Kodesh-Mt. Olivet Baptist Church Exchange
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend 2024
14 January 2024/4 Shvat 5784
Rabbi Peter W. Stein**

Today we are not alone!

Good morning and thank you so much!

Thank you to Pastor Harvey for his warm welcome and to all of you for coming together on Friday night and this morning. I truly value this historic exchange.

Just a few weeks ago, Rabbi Herbert Bronstein died at the age of 93. He accomplished many things as a rabbi and a community leader.

He was rabbi at Temple B'rith Kodesh for 15 years, before moving to Chicago in 1972. Even 50 years after his departure, Rabbi Bronstein is remembered with affection and admiration for his influence on so many lives.

Rabbi Bronstein was part of the leadership that erected our building on Elmwood Avenue, moving us from our longtime home on Gibbs Street. He wrote this about the magnificent dome that is the centerpiece of our sacred space.

“The dome links us to the very beginning of Jewish history. Like the Tabernacle of old, it teaches us to aspire to build a better world here on earth. It reminds us of the sanctity, the grandeur, the nobility of life. It represents our responsibility to Jewish history to take over the role of the spiritual fountainhead of the future. It symbolizes the greatness, the opportunities, the responsibilities of our period of history, and it is a symbol of the promise of a world of peace and equity for all humanity.”

This is how I feel this morning, as we gather in the sacred space of Mt. Olivet. This morning is a chance to reflect on the responsibilities of this period in history, of this moment in time. This morning is a chance to remember and to pursue a world of peace and equity.

We gather each year on Martin Luther King weekend, and so we inevitably turn to the powerful teachings that Dr. King offered during his life. His words and his example are important for us to remember.

Early in his most famous 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial, the time where he told us about his dream, Dr. King proclaimed “We cannot walk alone!”

There is a power and an importance in being together...in putting an end to solitude or any individual search for justice.

The idea is the foundation of Psalm 133: “Behold how good and how beautiful it is to sit together, all of us, as brothers and sisters.” This is a common refrain in our Jewish worship services...*Hine Ma Tov*.

We cannot walk alone. There is beauty and power and importance in coming together.

The psalm hints at something more...togetherness isn't just about coexisting, but is about creating a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. It's about creating a safe and a brave space, where we are able to articulate what is important to us...what matters to us...what is keeping us up at night.

Pastor Harvey and I met several weeks ago over oatmeal and eggs, as we do regularly, not only to enjoy a meal together, but to open up to one another about what was happening in our lives, in our congregations, and what we were focused on in the community.

Both of us feel a weight and a responsibility in our community and world. Simply put, there is a woeful lack of safety and security. An overwhelming number of people are living with fear and without a sense of what the future may hold for them.

In 2023 in Rochester, there was a homicide roughly every eight days. And that is consistent over the last ten years.

And on New Year's Day 2024 in our city, two people were killed. It begins again.

In the US, in 2023 there were 656 mass shootings and 40 mass murders. 297 children under the age of 11 were killed and 1385 between 12 and 17. That's nearly 1700 children that we lost this past year.

I offer these numbers as a way to raise my voice and give some definition to the crisis of our generation. But it is not about numbers.

The Talmud, the ancient teachings of the first rabbis, offers this wisdom: "Whoever destroys a single life, destroys an entire world. Whoever saves a single life, saves an entire world."

Each life represents an entire world. When a person dies, all their potential accomplishments and all their future generations are lost. And so, when we look at this plague of gun violence, the world is destroyed over and over and over again.

I don't have the policy prescriptions nor do I think that is what is needed in these few moments we are sharing together. Rather, I find myself reflecting on the conversations I had with Rev. Harvey over the recent holiday season.

People are afraid. People are alone.

And we can do something about it.

We can come together, create a sense of sisterhood and brotherhood, strengthen our resolve...and put an end to isolation and fear...one life at a time.

Our city suffered terribly during the riots of July 1964. Rabbi Bronstein, who I mentioned earlier, preached in the aftermath of this violence. His argument was disarming in its directness: too many had simply averted their eyes from the poverty and anger...[too many] had not been aware of the enormity of the problems...

And today, here we are...sixty years after those riots...and the urgent need is still for us to resolve not to look away.

We need to look at one another, those who are like us and those who have different identities and different opinions and different perspectives. We need to look at one another, really truly look at one another, and say: you are my brother-you are my sister.

You matter to me. If you are hurting, then I am hurting. If you are forced to live with vulnerability and fear, then I cannot rest secure in my own bed.

This exchange was established over forty years ago by Rev. Johnson and Rabbi Miller. These two leaders built a relationship to help us not live separate lives.

Their challenge to us, as Dr. King expressed it, was that we cannot walk alone. We must not look away, forgetting that we are all connected.

I think of the image in Mark Twain's classic *Huckleberry Finn*. My experience is that most people remember Huck's statement, but not Jim's question in response.

Huck has a moment of revelation and declares, "Jim, your blood's red, same as mine!"

And Jim's response: "You didn't know that before, Huck?"

My question and my concern comes from both parts of this exchange.

How do we cultivate an awareness that everyone in our city, everyone in our country, is breathing the same air? That no matter one's zip code or race or political perspective, we are all connected to one another. That we all, as we know from the audacious description in the book of Genesis, are created in the divine image, all of us equal under God.

We are all the same, flesh and blood mortal creatures, created with fragility and with tremendous power. And what happens to any one of us, happens to all of us.

And how come so many live seeing differences instead of what brings us together?

Jim's response to Huck makes me sad, because it reflects something that is so true: how can so many live not knowing that we all have the same red blood coursing through our veins? That yes, we should celebrate our uniqueness, but that there is so much more that unites us compared to what divides us.

We must not walk alone.

The Reverend and the Rabbi came together 40 years ago to establish a special relationship between Mt. Olivet and B'rith Kodesh. 40 years.

40 is an important number in the Bible. It is a symbolic and holy number...the length of a journey through to completion...40 days for Noah's flood. 40 years for the Israelites in the desert. 40 days and nights for Moses on the mountain to be with God and receive the sacred words...And in the account of the prophet Jonah, the city of Nineveh was given 40 days to repent before the divine punishment.

And while not from the Jewish scriptural tradition, in the spirit of this interfaith moment, I add the Christian scriptures teaching that Jesus taught for 40 days after the resurrection.

40 is a number that tells us that the time for rebirth and renewal has come. It tells us of transformation, of new life, new hope, and new possibilities.

We have journeyed 40 long and important years since we first gathered with Rev. Johnson and Rabbi Miller. The journey is not done but the time is now to begin again. My prayer for all of us is that this will be a time when we renew and extend our relationship.

Let this be a moment where we declare, “I will not journey alone.”

Let this be a moment where we declare, “I walk together with my brothers and my sisters.”

Let us rise up from this exchange, understanding our common concern and the urgency of this moment: to take action so that our city and our country will no longer be overwhelmed by the plague of violence.

Let us rise up today, each one of us with something unique to contribute, to say that no one should be afraid to walk the streets or to enter into any place at all.

Today, we are not alone! We are together, and there is extraordinary power in that.

Today, we are not alone! We are together, and together, we can make a difference.

Today, we are not alone! We are together, and we are on the path to a world of peace.

Behold how good and how beautiful it is to be together. Today, we are not alone!