

Rabbi Peter W. Stein
Temple B'rith Kodesh and Mt. Olivet Baptist Church
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Exchange
February 10, 2019/5 Adar I 5779

Right Here, Right Now

It is a great honor to be here with all of you today. I am so grateful for this opportunity to worship together, to learn together, to remember together, and to draw inspiration from this gathering that we will carry into our homes and into the community. Thank you to Rev. Harvey and to all of the faithful leaders of Mt. Olivet for your warm embrace and welcome. I am especially grateful to all of the gifted musicians from both the temple and the church that have joined together to create something holy and beautiful.

This exchange focuses, of course, around Martin Luther King weekend. Well, that wasn't possible this year because of the snow. There's an old Yiddish expression, one that we can easily translate into Baptist, that says *Der mentsch trakht un got lakht*: Man plans and God laughs.

Since that snowstorm, we had the polar vortex with subzero temperatures, and then a warm up that included that magnificent 63 degree sunny day on Monday. It has been quite a ride in the weather world!

The irony is that MLK Day, the day after our original planned date for this exchange, was a holiday in the Jewish calendar. It was our Arbor Day, an Earth Day of sorts, celebrated for nearly 2000 years. Even while we are still deep in the cold winter here in Rochester, the timing for this festival of the trees is set at this particular time because in the warm climate of the land of Israel, the first hints of spring...the very first blooms on the trees...come at about this time. I had the privilege of travelling to Israel just last week, and was able to see the elegant white almond blossoms flowering on the trees. It was truly beautiful!

This holiday is meant as a reminder and a celebration of the glorious cycle that God has created: spring turns into summer and then into fall and then into winter...and then, inevitably and extraordinarily, winter turns into spring and the rhythm continues.

Marking this festival of the New Year of the Trees reminds me of the ancient legend of Adam, on his very first night in the Garden of Eden. Adam enjoyed that first day in Paradise, glorying in the warm sunshine and the beautiful surroundings.

And then, the sun went down. It became dark and cold.

Adam had never experienced such a thing before! He was in great despair. What had happened to that beautiful sun? What had happened to that warm sweet air, feeling so good on his skin? It was dark. Adam was alone and afraid.

He spent that night crying out...wondering what he had done to cause this great destruction.

And then, the sun came up over the horizon. The sky turned from black to orange and yellow and red...and then to a beautiful blue.

Adam felt so good and he gave thanks. He realized that there was a Creator, far greater than he, who had set in motion the rhythms of the universe. And so, each morning, as the sun comes up, we give thanks to God, "Creator of the Light." And each night, as the sun goes down, we don't cry out against the darkness, but rather, we give thanks once again to God, for creating a rhythm and a cycle, showing us that light comes out of the dark.

And each year, when the temperature drops and the snow falls, we give thanks to God, for we know that even in this darkest season, there is rebirth and renewal on the horizon. The trees will bloom once again!

Friends, we are here together once again, and I am so grateful for the opportunity. We are here, two communities of faith, distinct in our practice but united in our confidence that there is a brighter future ahead...we just need to make it so!

We gather each year as our nation pays tribute to the wisdom and the example of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The importance of remembering his leadership goes beyond that one weekend, of course, and so today, I hope that we continue to honor and sustain his legacy.

Dr. King was born in 1929. He would have been 90 years old last month!

I am mindful of an ancient Jewish teaching (Avot 5:21) that discusses what we acquire at different ages...strength by thirty, understanding by forty, and so on. Inspired by the Psalms (90:10), we know that “The days of our years are three score years and ten, or by reason of strength, four score years...”

So, by that biblical conception, 70 is a full life and at 80, one is filled with great strength.

What does the ancient text say about 90? “At ninety, one is bent.”

With apologies to those in attendance who are at or beyond this age...yes, by 90 the back may be tired, but at 90, the ancient rabbis imagined, one would be filled with great wisdom and experience, bent only by those accumulated hard earned experiences.

But we know that being bent over is not a sign of weakness or fatigue. Rather, in different religious traditions in different ways, we bend the knee, we bow, we hold ourselves low to demonstrate our reverence...to show our recognition that God is present. As our patriarch Jacob said when he awoke from that long frightful night of wrestling with the angel, “God was in this place and I, I did not know!”

90 is an age when one has hard earned knowledge to share...hard earned understanding of our place in this wondrous world that God has created.

Dr. King was robbed of the chance to reach this glorious milestone. We can only imagine the sermon he might have given for this birthday, sharing the wisdom of nine decades of sacred struggle.

Because hatred and violence have forced us to live in a world without Dr. King's leadership, we are challenged to remain in our own search for the right and good path. Just as we do with the rising and the setting of the sun, let us search for God's presence. Just as we do each time the seasons change, let us try and understand that we are part of a big broad glorious universe, and endless possibilities extend before us.

When Jacob cried out that he understood God's presence, he had just finished a night of wrestling with an angel. Angels, in the Bible especially, are created by God and put into the world for a special purpose, to deliver a special message.

So, in a sense, we can adapt the attitude that there are angels among us in every generation...in every place...God has put forth those who can inspire us and teach us how to discern the healing path.

Call them angels or call them prophets: I want us this morning, right here and right now, to resolve that we will renew our search for those who come with a message of hope and possibility. Can we see them? Can we hear them?

Now, whenever I consider the possibility of setting forth on a search, I am reminded of one of my favorite stories...reminding us that we don't necessarily need to go far.

There was once a very poor man. His name was Isaac. He lived in such grave poverty that he often didn't know where his next crust of bread would come from. Still, he had faith that God would not let him starve, and that one day his suffering would end.

One night, Isaac had a dream that there was a great treasure, buried under a bridge in a distant city. At first, he paid the dream no attention, assuming it was mere wishful thinking. After all, who doesn't dream of riches?

But then, the dream repeated itself night after night after night, and he began to reconsider. Could it possibly be true?

So, Isaac set off to the big city, a long and tiring journey. When he arrived, even though he had never been there before, he discovered that there was indeed a bridge, looking exactly like it had in his dream. He was excited!

The only problem? The bridge was right near the royal palace and was heavily guarded 24 hours a day. Guards marched back and forth, watching for any suspicious activity. How could Isaac possibly go and dig under the bridge?

But Isaac had come a long way to that distant city, and he wasn't going to give up that easily. He came back to the bridge day after day, trying to see what he could see.

Eventually, the guards began to recognize him and they became curious. One of the guards came to him and asked, "Why do you come here every day? Are you waiting for someone? Are you looking for something?"

Isaac figured that he had nothing to lose, so he told the guard about his dream: that he lived in a far off village but had dreamed that he would find a buried treasure under this bridge.

The guard began laughing...you are a fool! You came all this way because of a silly dream? You fool! I had a dream once, that a poor man living in a tiny little house had a buried treasure under the stove in his house...but, you don't see me leaving here and running off to search in some far off village, do you? That would be a wild goose chase!

Well, as you can imagine, Isaac immediately hurried off to buy a ticket for the first train back home. Now he knew where to look! And sure enough, as soon as he got back home, he pushed aside his stove and began to dig. And there, after some hard digging, he found a chest filled with gold coins!

Isaac was overjoyed! He made sure to share the treasure with those who were in need, living his life with generosity and gratitude. And Isaac made sure to share a message with anyone who would listen: You don't always find what you're looking for by travelling to far off places. Treasures can be found right here at home, if we listen to our dreams and when we put in the effort.

So, I believe, we can adapt the attitude that there are angels among us in every generation...in every place...in our time and in our community. God has put forth those who can inspire us and teach us how to discern the healing path.

We learn this too from a different source of wisdom, Mr. Rogers...who told us "When I was a boy and would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

Call them helpers or angels or call them prophets: I want us this morning, right here and right now, to resolve that we will renew our search for those who come with a message of hope and possibility. Can we see them? Can we hear them?

It may seem like too much to search for a prophet right here among us. After all, we know when we read of the great prophets of biblical times, that extraordinary events filled their days. Who among us today can live up to their example?

And yet: we need not look for the fire and brimstone. Rather, let us focus on the essence of those prophetic messages. Remember Micah, who told us (6:8): “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Let us search for those who live in this way...and let us try and live in this way ourselves...waking up each morning and walking humbly with God.

This past year was the 200th birthday of Frederick Douglass. Douglass, whose extraordinary life rested on the legacy of the prophet Jeremiah, asking as he did: “Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?”

Douglass preached the words of the prophet Isaiah (Chapter 1:4-20): “Ah sinful nation...Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom, give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah...your hands are full of blood.”

We too can sound the alarm. It may be a bit dramatic to invoke the image of Sodom and Gomorrah, but let us remember what characterized those places. It wasn't just violence or immorality...it was a pervasive, persistent lack of caring. Those biblical cities are remembered through the generations because they were places where no one was helpful to those who were in need. They were places where those who were vulnerable were preyed upon, taken advantage of, looked down upon. Those cities were places where self-interest ruled the day.

We can respond to ensure that those cities are locked away forever in the history books. We can be the prophets when we open our hands and our hearts, creating healing, hope and possibility.

We can, this day, right here and right now, remember Isaiah and Jeremiah and Micah, and follow their lesson that God has called us to act with generosity and selflessness.

We can, this day, remember Frederick and especially remember Martin, who taught us that "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Right here, right now, we can resolve to see and hear the prophets who are among us. Right here, right now, we can resolve that we will not remain silent when self-interest rules the day.

Right here, right now, we can resolve that we will act. We know from Dr. King that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. And so, as we continue past the 90th anniversary of his birth, let us ensure that while hatred and violence robbed him of the chance to reach this milestone, we will mark this day by working for justice everywhere, close to home and in every single corner of our community.

Let us remember Adam crying out in the darkness, and coming to understand God's presence. Let us cry out in the darkness of our times and answer the voice of the prophets among us this day.

Let us understand the unique and extraordinary potential that is implanted within us. God has given us every ability to heal the world...we need only to respond. Let us begin: right here and right now.