

**Martin Luther King Day**  
**January 19, 2004**  
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On the holiday of Pesach, on which we commemorate and celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, we retell the story told in the Bible—part of which we read today—of our people’s liberation from bondage to freedom. We do this, though, in a very odd way. As we tell the story, we omit the mention of one particular individual who—at least as far as the Bible is concerned—is fairly important. Of all the individuals whose names do not appear in the traditional Haggadah, one clearly stands out. That individual is none other than Moses. When we speak of what really got us out of Egypt, we speak of a “mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” Needless to say, they are not those of Moses!

The reason for this reluctance to speak of Moses is not difficult to discern: there’s always a risk when one glorifies a hero. Hero worship can turn a hero into a demi-god, and it can bring us very close to idolatry. In the Torah, there are times that it seems that Moses is being depicted this way—as, for instance, when we’re told (in parashat Ki Tissa) that his face is all aglow. So the danger is real. Moreover, as we all know, in almost every generation, it seems there are those who would see in one or another hero, messianic or even divine-like qualities. Our tradition has understandably and wisely been concerned about that.

And yet, once we’re aware of the dangers of idolatry, we can and should give credit where credit is due. It would be wrong not to. Yes, we must be willing to see human heroes as no more than human, but then we should acknowledge strong leadership when we see it, especially when it is employed in order to deliver a people from oppression. Today is Martin Luther King Day, set aside to reflect on the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life was cut short by an assassin’s bullet on April 4, 1968. Can one imagine a Haggadah of the civil rights movement in this country that would fail to mention him? How can we fail to speak about him this day? It behooves us to celebrate his achievements, which were considerable.



To the thirteen year olds among us—and maybe some of us older folks as well—it may seem that this day was established by the New England ski industry as a way of boosting their profits. Which is a shame. In fact, it wasn't easy for this day to be established. The reason is that Martin Luther King—and this may come as a surprise to the young people here who have no reason to have any recollection of his impact on this country, considering that he'd been dead for 23 years before they were even born—was not a universally popular man in this country. In fact, he was feared and reviled. Not only did many white Americans distrust him, even among African-Americans he was not universally respected.

His efforts to further the cause of civil rights often met with resistance. At least initially, some of them led to an increase in tension, if not discrimination. He was often criticized by his fellow African-Americans as either not militant enough or too militant. This should remind us of the reaction Moses faced when his first effort to free the Israelites resulted in increased work duties for his fellow Israelites. The Israelite foremen, who bore the brunt of the Egyptian displeasure at the Israelites' audacity in striving to be free turned to Moses and said: "May the Lord look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us." (Exodus 5:21)

We saw the same phenomenon earlier this morning, when we read from the Torah. God tells Moses to tell the people that it is God's will that they should be free and that God was going to do it, and was going to bring them to the land he swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But when Moses does this, when he tells the Israelites this good news, the text tells us, "they would not listen to Moses, for their spirits were crushed by cruel bondage."

An ordinary person would have bowed out right then and there. But apparently Moses wasn't an ordinary person. Neither was Martin Luther King. Dr. King had a certain kind of confidence that allowed him to have faith in the ultimate outcome of his struggle, even when it might have seemed hopeless.

Looking back, we can say he was right. Although there remain serious challenges to achieving the goal of full equality for all in this country, who can deny the enormous accomplishments that have been made since the late 1950s, when Martin Luther King began his national ministry? Last night, I re-read Dr. King's classic

essay, “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” He had been incarcerated for participating in an anti-segregation demonstration in Birmingham. While he was in prison, eight local clergy had written a statement, published in a local newspaper, criticizing his activities as “unwise and untimely.” Several of the signatories were bishops, and several were ministers. One was a rabbi, Rabbi Milton L. Grafman. These clergymen deplored the demonstrations, so Dr. King, as a fellow clergyman, felt obliged to respond. He first explained the four steps of his non-violent campaigns: collection of facts, negotiation, purification and direct action. Then he explained why the cry to African-Americans to “wait” was so offensive. African-Americans, he said, had waited more than 340 years for their God-given rights. He admitted that sometimes he urged his followers to break the law—but only when the law was unjust. He gave an example. “It was illegal,” he wrote, “to aid and comfort Jews in Hitler’s Germany. Even so,” he wrote, “I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers.”

He then explained why he was so disappointed with the authors of that statement that criticized him. He was frustrated, he told them, with white moderates who, he believed, were his movement’s greatest stumbling block. “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will,” he wrote. “Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?” he wrote. I took all this personally, as I think it was intended to be taken. As I read those powerful words, I wondered, “What are the issues about which I am not speaking from the pulpit? Is this pulpit being used to further justice and equity, to alleviate human suffering? What about our community as a whole? Just the other day (January 15, 2004), the Jewish Community Relations Council came out with a statement on same-sex marriage. Acknowledging and respecting the diversity of views on this issue within the Greater Boston Jewish community, it nonetheless gave its support—based on its historic commitment to civil rights—to same-sex couples and their families in their quest to enjoy liberty and equal justice under law. Are we doing enough to further equal protection under the law? Should we be doing more?

Maybe all of us should take the words of Dr. King’s letter to heart. What are the concerns which we are ignoring? Has economic oppression been eliminated in this country? Has racial injustice disappeared? Is access to health care adequate? Are there no concerns about environmental assaults? Just before Martin Luther King

died he was beginning to articulate his opposition to the Vietnam War. Have we grown so complacent that, so long as the stock market stays stable, we will tolerate almost anything? Is the strongest leadership on issues of social and economic justice to be found on the op-ed pages of certain newspapers rather than in the pulpits of our churches and synagogues?

Perhaps things were and are not quite as black and white as Dr. King's rhetoric suggests. I did some research on Rabbi Grafman, the rabbi who signed that statement criticizing King. Rabbi Grafman always claimed that he did not oppose King's goals, only his means. His behavior seems to bear him out. He publicly opposed George Wallace, he confronted the Klan, he chastised his congregants to hire more blacks in public positions and he served on integrated city boards long before it was popular. To his deep regret, Rabbi Grafman, who died in 1995, never lived down the racist label. This does raise a legitimate question: when we believe that we are right, when we decide to act: is everyone who opposes us wrong? Where is the boundary between righteousness and self-righteousness?

And yet, it's hard to disagree with the notion that religion, to be meaningful, must stand up for the oppressed and confront the complacency that often seizes us. Do we think about injustice or human suffering often enough? When we do, do we act on our beliefs? Do we do what needs to be done? On this day when we remember the self-sacrifice of a clergyman who really lived—and died—his faith, we should ask ourselves those sobering questions with intellectual honesty.