

Next Year in Jerusalem

When I was a young boy, I'd sit responsibly through our Passover seder every year. There were songs that I would look forward to and foods that were like a reunion with an old friend. But the moment that I awaited, each year, was when we were instructed to get up to open the front door for the Prophet Elijah to enter. Elijah, it is said, visits every home in which a Passover seder is taking place and it was always my job, along with my sister. While we were away from the table, my Grandfather, of blessed memory, would drink the wine from the cup we had poured for the Prophet. Just the way I now do at Temple Sinai's 2nd seder and the night before at my own table. Every single year, we'd rush back to the table to find that Elijah's wine was, once again, miraculously gone and we knew that a miracle had taken place.

Our tradition tells of miracles in Egypt which were a great deal more significant than a playful old man drinking the wine of Elijah. Last week we were introduced to an endlessly burning bush. And this morning, we read about staffs turning into serpents, the first seven miraculous plagues and we know that, just around the corner, we'll see Pillars of Fire and smoke and a sea that splits. Every year,

we tell the story and imagine what it must have been like to see it all happen.

But why must we return to the same telling every year? Because, as mere humans, we have short memories! We need reminding. We get lost along the way. The eternal themes of this holiday such as “be kind to the stranger for you were a stranger, yourself, in Egypt” need repetition. Regularity keeps timeless messages alive but, with regularity, we also run the risk of tuning out.

I often think of Dr. King’s most famous speech. We know that one can see further from higher places and what higher place on earth than a mountaintop? Moses stood on a couple of mountaintops. He stood on Sinai and a new world was revealed to him. Then, forty years later, he stood on Mount Nebo and looked across the Jordan River into the Promised Land and was shown what potential existed for his people.

Martin Luther King spent some time on a mountaintop, too. You know these words, he said: “God has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I

want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!”¹

Both men saw promise. Both saw potential. And, both men strove to share something of that vision with us and we still cling to their words because in our more expansive moments, we perceive the truth in their words.

In a few months, Jews will sit around our seder tables on Passover with our family and our guests and we will recite the following words:

“Chasal Siddur Pessach k’hilchato...Bashanah haba’ah b’yerushalyim. Our seder is now complete in accordance with the laws...Next year in Jerusalem”

I have said these words every year of my life since I’m a small boy, but I had not really stopped to consider them. Not, that is, until my first seder in Jerusalem. Suddenly it occurred to me that my sitting in the city, holy to so much of the world, and uttering these words highlighted a failure.

Bashanah Haba’ah b’Yerushalyim does not simply mean – next year may my body happen to find itself located in that city for the seder. No, the prayer asks God that we find ourselves in a different world; A world in which God has

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr – I’ve Been to the Mountaintop – April 3, 1968

judged us ready to accept a new reality. One in which every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." Dr. King spoke these words from Amos² and then went on to tell us what that day in Jerusalem would look like: "we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day".³

And how do we draw nearer to that Jerusalem? Rabbi Abraham Twersky tells a story that I find helpful:

There was a man who invited a friend to the Seder year after year. When the host recited the prayer, "Next Year in Jerusalem" his guest asked, "But you said that last year, yet you are still here." The host explained that indeed last year's prayer was not fulfilled, but that he was hopeful that the coming year would bring the Redemption. The following year, as they approached this portion of the Seder, the host turned his eyes

² Amos 5:24.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr – I Have a Dream– August 28, 1968

toward Heaven. “Please God” he said, “don’t put me through this humiliation again. I cannot keep on explaining why we are not being taken back to Jerusalem.” Perhaps, Twersky explains, if we were all a bit more genuinely ashamed of remaining in the world as it exists, our prayers to be granted access into God’s Jerusalem might be more sincere.⁴

Dissatisfaction, then, may prove to be the greatest motivator on our path to heal this broken world. And we look for motivation from all sources.

The question has been asked, does God still speak with humans? A Prophet is one who hears the voice of God as clearly as that of the person next to her. There is a Jewish teaching that the age of prophecy came to a close with Malachi.⁵ But there is another Jewish response which teaches that God is speaking to us all the time and in every place – what remains to be seen is: who among us will choose to listen?

Just like our seder, we return to the celebration of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – every year. Why? Because people of conscience believe that he presented a

⁴ Twerski, Rabbi Abraham. As quoted in From Bondage to Freedom: The Passover Haggadah. Shaar Press: New York, 1995. pg. 197.

⁵ Avot D’Rabbi Natan. 8:47.

future of which we would like to be a part. Because people of faith believe that, like Moses, this civil rights leader of the 20th century heard the word of God and sought to bring it into being in the human community. And, because we have short memories and Dr. King's dream is not yet fully realized.

And now, I would like to ask you to consider a different question. At Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the events of Charlottesville and the refusal of our leader to condemn naziism. I received three negative responses from the 700 or so people sitting with us that morning. If there were three, then there were undoubtedly more but only three approached me. Two were ideologically opposed to my position and one agreed with everything I'd said but believed that it had no place in the synagogue...the sanctuary, she said, should be a sanctuary from current events and politics.

It is this voice and this opinion that gives me the greatest pause. If I saw that we were all actively fighting for the world we believe *should* exist, then I could settle down and use this pulpit for discussing only psychologically comforting ideas about dealing with our shame and repentance and our personal worth or our connection with the Almighty. But, I look around and see that I and those around me simply shake our head as our president makes

racially staggering slurs about African countries. And then has the audacity to sign a proclamation honoring the legacy of Dr. King. And, as our government contemplates sending back the most vulnerable people to countries of origin that they have never known or in which they might not even survive. And I simply feel as though we are back on that mountaintop with Dr. King. But today, in order to look in to the Promised Land, we need a good pair of binoculars. What would Dr. King think about the state of affairs in America today and all that he believed was just over the next hilltop?

I am left unsure about the that congregant's request that I keep these and other pressing issues out of the sanctuary. And it is this position that I wish to ask you about.

Should I speak on these issues of consequence? Or, should I leave it to the social justice efforts of other times and places? Do we need to hear the voice of our tradition from our pulpits or is it better to keep this place removed from potentially divisive comments?

Please consider your responses to my questions and then, speak with each other over lunch. But, I ask you, please don't provide me with your answers today. I wish you to weigh them, consider my vulnerability as your rabbi and

your commitment to your congregation and, if this topic means enough to you, then find me at another point and tell me what you think. And, please don't think me terribly rude if you try to share thoughts today and I say, "but, you haven't had nearly enough time to consider this."

May this year prove to be one in which we take part in the next, significant steps toward the vision of God's kingdom on Earth. Allow the shame of our complacency to move us to raise our voices in defense of our great nation's ideals and in support of those who still cannot enjoy them. This year, when we say *Bashanah Haba'ah B'Yerushalyim* – Next Year in Jerusalem, please God, may we experience the inspiration which will carry us closer to the world You placed within our reach.