

Rabbi Jon Roos

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Temple Sinai, Washington, DC

Responding To This Moment, Part 1: Getting It Right

Praying with your feet is one of our core religious principles. We celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., because King is an inspiration, a hero and a model to us. We share his guiding principle: that our religious beliefs are to be applied to the challenges, problems, and opportunities of our world. Reverend King always looked to organized religion as having both a special mission and an obligation. “It is the voice of moral and spiritual authority on earth,” he wrote at the end of his life. He called congregations to task for too often sanctioning systemic injustice and for surrounding institutions of oppression with “the halo of moral respectability.” Any congregation that seeks to be true to its core religious mission, he taught, must “recapture its prophetic zeal, [or else] it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”¹

¹ Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community, 101-102.

Now it is worth acknowledging not all Jews, not all congregations or Jewish schools of thought agree with this. In fact, not every Jewish synagogue in America has a special MLK Shabbat. Some places tonight it's just plain Shabbat. Many synagogues emphasize mastery of Jewish law, the importance of Jewish continuity and intra communal Jewish relationships. But it is important for you and everyone to know that this is a core principle of Reform Judaism and Temple Sinai in particular. And this goes back a long, long time. I'm proud to be part of that. But this isn't about me, or Rabbi Goldstein, or Cantor Rhodes or Cantor Mann or Elana, or our current board members. It's not about the leaders of this generation. One of the founding documents of Reform Judaism, the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform stated: "In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation [that's the Torah]... we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society." We have continued that as one of our principles ever since. Rabbi David Saperstein, one of Reform Judaism's great leaders of social justice, wrote just a few years ago that, "Jews who would live up to the aspirations expressed in the Jewish tradition will insist that all human actions and

societal/government policies be measured by the core values of Judaism and Jewish texts.” (Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority, p. xxv)

And you may be familiar with the quote by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who was a partner and friend of King in their day who gave voice to this principle, in saying that, as a Rabbi, he led marches in the 1960s rather than simply staying inside the synagogue to lead services, because in doing so, he famously said was, “Praying with his feet.”

Discernment must precede action. We also honor Dr. Martin Luther King for his courageous and tenacious action in response to the challenges of his day for the practical steps that he took and that he led. Many of you expressed outrage, fear, and confusion about events unfolding in streets across America, in Los Angeles, California to right here at North Hampton and Oregon just a few blocks away from our building. ICE deployments and raids, shootings and violent tactics against civilians, shutting down avenues for judicial review and investigation, bellicose actions abroad, funding cuts, name changes to important institutions, building demolitions of historical significance. It’s hard to keep up.

Many have been asking, “What Can I Do?” I am going to try to start answering that question and urge further discussion and reflection on that question tonight and next week in a sermon that will continue the topic.

The first step follows the model and inspiration of Martin Luther King. Dr. King emphasized discernment, inner clarity and grounding as the necessary prerequisites for acting in society to confront injustice and evil when we see it. In one of his last published books, *Where Do We Go From Here?* Reverend King asserted, “The prescription for the cure rests with the accurate diagnosis of the disease.... [and] redemption can come only through... an honest knowledge of self.”² So, at the risk of appearing to avoid answering the question, “What Can I Do?” I urge would urge that the first step is to take that inspiration to heart. And that each of us struggling to answer that question, “What Can I Do?” should commit first to a process of self-examination and discernment.

Now this time to understand, reflect, and discern, this time is modeled, not just on Dr King’s teachings but on the Exodus story as

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, (Beacon Press, Boston ,1968), p. 88.

well, particularly last week and this week's Torah portion. Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites and the unfolding of the Exodus is Judaism's archetype for injustice and response to it. And the necessary prerequisite in the Torah account is the individual coming first to a state of awareness, coming to discern and coming to know that something is in fact wrong and that the individual has an obligation to respond to it in a way that comports with Judaism's teachings about human dignity and equality, the centrality of peace, and institutions of justice and fairness. The Hebrew word to KNOW – the root is Yod Dalet Ayin – runs throughout these first 13 chapters of Exodus with a lexical density that cannot be ignored. It appears at the end of Chapter 2, confirming that God's consciousness has been awakened and the Torah tells us as a concluding statement simply this:

- וַיֵּדַע אֱלֹהִים: "God knew."

To the beginning of this week's parashah where God tells Moses that all the patriarchs and all the matriarchs and all of the heroic characters of the first part of the Torah, they experienced God by the name "El Shaddai" but it tells us explicitly God's name YHVH – Ehyeh – וַשְׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נֹדַעְתִּי לָהֶם: – Ehyeh – It was not yet known to them.

I don't want to belabor the Hebrew and risk losing the point. If you're up for it, take a look – not at the English translation because you won't see it there – at the Hebrew if you can. It's just too much use of the verb YADA in one story for it not to mean something. Before any of the plagues. Before Moses even returns to Egypt to challenge the Pharaoh, before God decides to liberate the Israelites, everyone is coming to see and understand. This is the Jewish requirement for what to do when you are trying to figure out what to do.

Judaism is not about love. Judaism is about getting it right.

Now it's also true and important to acknowledge that we are not entirely aligned with Reverend Dr. King. We have significant difference with his core philosophy. King, as you know, was a Christian and he led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He believed in love and his process of discernment and his formulation of any action in response to injustice was based on the Christian conception of love called "agape." This conception of love is not romantic love and it's not familial love. It's love of humanity a little more complicated for me to explain here but King does describe it beautifully in his book *Strength to Love*.

Judaism does not make love its center. I know I'm contradicting several recent, popular and well received books on Judaism. I know some may have a visceral, oppositional reaction to this assertion. And yes, we have love in our liturgy. But Love is not the primary motivator nor is love the guiding force in Judaism for responding to injustice and challenges around us. Judaism centers getting things right. Even for Reform Judaism and for strands of our religion that are not legalistic and talmudic, getting it right is the primary driving force.

Let's look again at the exodus. The archetype of injustice and fighting against it never mentions love. Not once. Not as a standard against which we can discern oppression and not as a motivator for responding to hate. In fact, the word itself does not even appear in these first 13 chapters of Exodus. Love does not motivate God, Moses, or the Jewish people. In fact, the main thing we learn about ourselves in this story is that we quarrel easily with other, complain quickly and often, and tend towards cynicism and disbelief. Moses says over and over "they won't believe me." The two slaves who Moses sees fighting with each other, and their response when tries to intervene is literally: who made you the boss of us?

In a critical passage from chapter 4, when God tells Moses that God's self has been awakened and will respond to Pharaoh's injustice. God makes five promises. Our tradition sees them as so important to the story that they are basis for the five cups at the passover seder – the four we drink and the fifth one for Elijah. God says, having discerned and come to know that something stinks in Egypt, God says, I will free you, I save you, I will redeem you and I will take you as my people and fifth one for Elijah I will bring you to the promised land. Now this would be a great moment to insert some Love, if it were meant to be our motivating force of our tradition. God could say I will free you, I save you, I will redeem you and I will take you. When God says that God will respond Egypt, God says, I will extend my arms, stretch out my hand, and about to love Egypt back to its senses...But that's not what God is going to do. God says I will extend my arms and open my hands to smite Egypt. Moses expresses again and again his doubts about himself and his own concern that he will be able to lead the people or do God's work in confronting Pharaoh, because among other things, he speaks so poorly. God does not say, Moses, remember God loves you. God basically says, fine, getting it right is too important for me to let you mess this up, I'll send Aaron, and he'll speak for you, because we're going to get this one right.

Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof. The importance of getting it right is conveyed by the maybe most commonly cited verse of Torah about the pursuit of justice. In Deuteronomy where it says tzedek, tzedek tirdof: Justice Justice shall you pursue. Our tradition says that the second appearance of tzedek, you only needed it once, you could have just said tzedek tirdof, pursue justice. But tzedek, tzedek, meant to convey how we do it matters. That in Judaism it's not just about the outcomes that matters. But the motivations and getting it done right is what counts.

So before we try to answer that really important question **WHAT CAN WE DO?** We have to take some time. Let's take a week, from this Shabbat and the next, to explore and discern and come to know: what is really happening out there in the world. Not just what images and their salacious framing have I consumed in this past week. But about what things can I not say, "*Lo Nodati* (They weren't known to me)," but, "*Ken Nodati* (Yes, I knew)." I have to come to know as truth the following things. Upon what values and whose wisdom can I rely in such a way that it will be true to say to yourself however many years hence that you still stand by what you believed and what you said in these days.

And let's come back together next week and begin to address it, based on that clarity and that knowledge and understanding what it is we can do.

Shabbat shalom.