

SERMON: Parashat BaShallach
Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, Jan 19, 2019
In honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

SAFE ON THE OTHER SIDE?

Before I really get into my remarks this morning, I want us all to pause for a moment, and try to imagine the joy, the jubilation you would have felt if you had been slaves, then escaped with all your people, and then with an army hunting you down, a sea opened and you got across only to see those chasing you be covered by the waters. Just try and imagine that feeling of relief and release.

Now, try to remember the time in your life that is closest to getting out of a bad situation, escaping danger and attack, finally getting to the other side of a terrible situation?

The joy of liberation. The joy of escape. There is really nothing like them. The combination of joy and relief, and of having choices before you – that is holy. And wouldn't we want all people to have that experience? To know that feeling?

Politics can get complicated, but today, as we read the Song of the Sea and we celebrate the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it's worth starting by simply appreciated the power of liberation, and that so many of today's problems are rooted in people simply wanting to experience it.

And I'm proud that Jewish tradition moves that experience to the center of human meaning and ethics. It is fundamental to our sense of what is holy.

The Exodus from Egypt is the paradigmatic story to express the move from slavery to freedom. This story was deeply meaningful to Dr. King, and to the civil rights movement he led. In 1958, in a speech in Miami Beach to the national convention of the American Jewish Congress, Dr. King said:

"My people were brought to America in chains. Your people were driven here to escape the chains fashioned for them in Europe. Our unity is born of our common struggle for centuries, not only to rid ourselves of bondage, but to make oppression of any people by others an impossibility"

And of course, we know that Jews were deeply and disproportionately involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

And as a kid in Georgia, people saying (and I paraphrase) *no blacks or Jews allowed* made clear to me that my fate and the fate of African-Americans were intertwined.

Our sense of shared struggle is one of the reasons that intense anti-Semitism in some parts of the black community is so upsetting, and as the recent controversy about the Women's March's leadership, and Tamika Mallory in particular, has made painfully visible something most of us are able to avoid seeing most of the time.

But of course, *we also can avoid seeing the racism in our own community, and we can forget that the African-American experience in America has been very different than the Jewish experience.* Despite very real anti-Semitism, mostly North America has been a place of opportunity and liberation for the Jewish community. For African-Americans, it has been a place they did not choose to come to, a place of slavery and continual violence and injustice.

James Baldwin, in a provocative essay in 1968, wrote. (and here I will use his language which includes the word Negro).

For it is not here, and not now, that the Jew is being slaughtered, and he is never despised, here, as the Negro is, because he is an American. The Jewish travail occurred across the sea and America rescued him from the house of bondage. But America is the house of bondage for the Negro, and no country can rescue him. What happens to the Negro here happens to him because he is an American.

The name of the essay is "[Negroes are Anti-Semitic because they are anti-White](#)" (click for link to full essay) In it, Baldwin in his usual razor-sharp but also no-holds-barred way, brilliantly describes one of the key ways systemic anti-Semitism works. Whatever one finds most hateful or threatening in ones' society, that thing is projected onto Jews. While other forms of prejudice and hate usually have a more specific range of accusations and projections, Jews seem to serve as a universal screen, so that if what you fear most is socialism, Jews are part of a socialist takeover, but if you see capitalism as the source of oppression, then the Jews become the ultimate capitalists. If you think secularism is a great threat, then the Jew are the leaders of that movement through university teaching, through the ACLU, but if you think religion is the opiate of the masses, then we

are enslaved to an archaic tradition and text. And if you feel that you are powerless against a large web of power you can't change, then the Jews become that.

And I think this same thing can take place on a national level with the projection onto Israel whatever it is one finds most evil in the world. If that is white militaristic police oppressive people of color, then the incredibly complicated relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, become reduced into a simplistic and blatantly untrue narrative of white colonialists oppressing indigenous people of color. Israel does many things I don't agree with, and the majority of Israelis vote in ways I would prefer they not, but this version is simply a projection and so off-base as to be laughable, if the stakes were not so high.

And it is this narrative that informs much of the BDS movement, and in the need to use terms like "Apartheid" by their proponents.

That is why I was happy, while reading Martin Luther King in preparation for this morning, to be reminded that Dr. King showed a clear support for Israel but also criticism. King, speaking at the annual convention of the Rabbinical Assembly in 1968, said: (and again, I am not changing his words, despite the archaic terms that were used)

Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all our might to protect her right to exist, its territorial integrity and the right to use whatever sea lanes it needs. Israel is one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security, and that security must be a reality.

And when at a college dinner, a student started attacking Zionism, King responded: "When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You're talking anti-Semitism."

And he wrote this in a letter to Adolph Held, the President of the Jewish Labor Committee: "Israel's right to exist as a state is incontestable," "At the same time the great powers have the obligation to recognize that the Arab world is in a state of imposed poverty and backwardness that must threaten peace and harmony."

We can't know what Dr. King would say about Israel today, but it was good to be reminded the Dr. King and most of the leaders of his movement saw our struggles and histories as having powerful parallels.

At that speech to the American Jewish Congress in 58, he had what felt like a moment of prophecy:

“There are Hitlers loose in America today, both in high and low places,” he said further on. “As the tensions and bewilderment of economic problems become more severe, history(s) scapegoats, the Jews, will be joined by new scapegoats, the Negroes. The Hitlers will seek to divert people’s minds and turn their frustrations and anger to the helpless, to the outnumbered. Then whether the Negro and Jew shall live in peace will depend upon how firmly they resist, how effectively they reach the minds of the decent Americans to halt this deadly diversion.

And of course, today there are many more groups on that list: immigrants, Muslims, women, poor people, transpeople.

One of the great gifts of Kings legacy is his great efforts to find ways to work together, to reach across divides, and to fight against us-vs-them thinking. King looked for ways to affirm our common humanity.

It seems to me a powerful coincidence that the day we read the Song of the Sea is on Martin Luther King weekend and the day of the Women’s March. After all, our Torah includes the original Women’s March:

Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. (Ex 15:20)

That march took place safe on the other side of the sea. And I think sometimes, we let ourselves start to believe that in terms of anti-Semitism and hatred, we were on that other side, that we had learned to live respectfully in diversity, where we can all dance together across our difference and our very different life experiences. But then, something happens and we realize we are only half way across, and there is a pillar of dust between us, and walls of water a on our right and our left, threatening to destroy our march toward liberation.

It is easy in these times to circle our wagons, to withdraw, and to lean into the comfort and trust of our community, and certainly self-care and community

support is crucial. That is my first instinct. But if we truly take Dr. King's lead, instead of pulling in, we will find new ways to reach out.

While I'm sad that the controversy has hurt the Women's March and the very important goals that original march had, I am in some ways glad that at least the issue is now out in the open. I'm glad that the anti-Semitism as well as the homophobia and transphobia has become visible. That gives us the opportunity to try and address is.

Each of us can do that in our private lives, but as a community, I would like your help in organizing a dinner and conversation between the local African – American community and the Temple Sinai community. If some of you would be interested in helping with that, email me.

There are forces in the zeitgeist that seem to want to tear us all apart, and put us on edge. We know that, but now it seems it has come closer the home. So let's try and reach out, to firm up our connections with other communities that are focused on the sacred power of liberation.

So let us go back to where we started, just to the feeling of liberation, of getting out of the narrow place we were just in, of going from bondage to freedom. We all want that, and if we can remember that is what we are all wanting, perhaps we can stay rooted in our common humanity. Only if we remember that, can we march through all the challenges and together, join hands on the other side, and sing.

כן יהי רצון