

Bo 5781
King, Heschel, and Us
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Over the past two weeks, we've sat together in this space and considered how we might find ourselves as a kahal in light of an attempted coup and the upcoming transfer of power. Today I'd like to raise up the celebration of Martin Luther King Day and spend several minutes thinking together about the relationship between the Reverend Dr. King and Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel. In particular, I'd like to share with you theological affinities in their work, as put forth by Heschel's daughter, Susannah Heschel in an article she wrote ("Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr." 1998: Conservative Judaism, Vo. 50 No. 2-3, The Rabbinical Assembly).

Dr. Heschel and Dr. King enjoyed a real and significant friendship. They prayed together and stood side by side for civil rights and justice for all. The iconic photograph of those two, marching arm in arm, has come to symbolize a symbiosis of the Black and White-Jewish communities in that moment.

Susannah Heschel posits that beyond their shared political sympathies, theological affinities drew King and Heschel together and formed the basis of their close friendship. Both had left more conservative (with a small "c") and insular religious upbringings to lead within their faiths from more expansive theological frameworks and with newfound cross-cultural openness. Both saw their political work as deeply intertwined with an understanding of a God who suffers with the oppressed and invests in their liberty. Let's explore a bit more deeply what lay within those similarities.

First and foremost, both responded deeply to the prophetic call for justice and compassion and the type of God on Whose behalf prophets spoke. King experienced prophetic resonance in the southern Black church, Heschel in the Hasidism of Eastern Europe. Each articulated a prophetic-infused theology that naturally flowed into their moral teachings, the ways they led others in prayer, and the centrality of their political commitments. For both, the emphasis on the prophets as social critics, rather than trance-like preachers or religious critics, departed from their scholarly training. Their respective experiences produced culturally nuanced preaching practices, but both stemming from the prophetic call.

Susannah Heschel notes with interest that the religiosity of the Black church served most instrumental as the reason for King's broad influence, and acclaim, especially in how profoundly he inspired and moved millions of people beyond his church and well beyond his lifetime. Describing King's intuitive understanding of how to use those methodologies to effect, she writes, "He knew...there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out" (p. 128).

But each man also departed from the religious community of his childhood, when it came to their Civil Rights work. In that breach, it seems the two found another affinity. She described an ambivalence within the Black church toward the Civil Rights movement, especially outside of major urban centers. Likewise, the Hasidic and Orthodox Jewry of Heschel's early years showed distinct disinterest in his ecumenical work in the Civil Rights movement. In fact, celebrated figures in the Jewish world attacked him for it. Yet, both men also were able to find inspiration in the religiosity of primary communities to propel them toward their shared work.

Their commonalities can be seen in their words and were also felt in the evocative ways both men used religious language. Both emphasized the Hebrew Bible in their preaching--King focusing heavily on the Exodus narrative and Heschel more oriented around the Prophets. Of course, King also invoked the Gospel, but his dominant narrative is not an emulation of Jesus but an emulation of Moses as Liberator, in the Exodus narrative from which we read a few minutes ago. Over and over again, both King and Heschel returned to Biblical narratives in their Civil Rights expression, making those narratives live in the hearts and minds of their contemporaries and inspiring their followers to see their own choices as history-making of great consequence not only for the trajectory of human beings but also for God.

Both men fundamentally believed that God was invested in the modern struggle for Civil Rights and that they and their followers were instruments of God's will. Neither believed in the Aristotelian notion of God as "unmoved mover", unconcerned with the emotional and political struggles of human life. Rather, both preached about a God who is deeply affected by human affairs. They believed that one's spiritual life drives political action. Working for Civil Rights, for them, was--and is--how we manifest God's desire for, and engagement in, the processes of justice, compassion, and caring for the downtrodden.

Moreover, in the prophetic tradition, both saw themselves as spokespeople for God. They believed themselves called to bring their own experiences and religious consciousness to bear on the contemporary moment.

The two shared a particular affinity for the prophet Amos, and both used Heschel's own translation of verse 5:24 as a kind of anthem for the entire Civil Rights movement: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Heschel was able to speak to White Jews in a way that King could not. He used the imagery of the Exodus narrative to rebuke white Jews for their own racism. We like to imagine a message of shared experience, two peoples sharing a history of slavery and oppression, but Heschel had the boldness to comparing white Jews to the Egyptians in the biblical narrative. Here is one such example:

In February 1964, Heschel reminded his audience that shortly after their departure from Egypt, the Israelites complained about the bitter water they found at Marah. They demanded of Moses, "What are we supposed to drink?" Heschel turned to his mostly white, Jewish audience and said:

"This episode seems shocking. What a comedown! Only three days earlier they had reached the highest peak of prophetic and spiritual exaltation, and now they complain about such a prosaic and unspiritual item as water...The Negroes (that was the term at the time) of America behave just like the children of Israel. Only in 1963, they experienced the miracle of having turned the tide of history, the joy of finding millions of Americans involved in the struggle for civil rights...Now only a few months later they have the audacity to murmur: "What shall we drink? We want adequate education, decent housing, proper employment." How ordinary, how unpoetic, how annoying!..." And, he went on: "The tragedy of of Pharaoh was the failure to realize that the exodus from slavery could have spelled redemption for both Israel and Egypt. Would that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had joined the Israelites in the desert, and together stood at the foot of Sinai!"

King and Heschel enjoyed their shared understandings and celebrated each other's gifts. Some of their most famous statements sound similar to one another's. For example, Heschel taught: "The opposite of good is not evil; the opposite of good is indifference. In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." King taught: "To accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system...The oppressed becomes as evil as the oppressor."

We like to imagine that Heschel's deep engagement in the Civil Rights movement represented much of the American Jewish community, but sadly, history does not bear that out. While there were a few prominent Civil Rights activists who happened to be

Jewish, Jewish organizations largely chose a deliberately passive stance, wishing Black Americans well but decidedly not risking their own, hard-won acceptance, to be activists. White Jews had a lot to learn then, and we have a lot to learn now. And we are learning.

Here at Beth Israel Center, our work with Nehemiah is beginning to get uncomfortable, and that is exactly what is supposed to be happening. We are discovering how much we act unconsciously without questioning our basic assumptions. We are learning about how much we lack humility when we encounter pent-up frustration and anger, and how we need to increase our capacity to stay with our intention to do good, even when we are checked, and even when we must relinquish control of a narrative that never should have thought we owned. It is hard to learn these things. It is good work. We are learning.

Reverend Raphael Warnock, the newly elected United States Senator from Georgia, who is a Baptist pastor, quoted the prophet Nehemiah in a Shabbat sermon he delivered last Friday evening at a joint online service of his congregation the shul of his friend and colleague, Rabbi Peter Berg. Unfortunately, a hack interrupted his delivery, but his words can be accessed online.

Reverend Warnock drew on Nehemiah--not our local organizational partner, but the Prophet Nehemiah. Reverend Warnock used Nehemiah to focus on continuing work yet unfinished. He called on the assembled Black and Jewish congregants to work together to complete the work of dismantling racism in our country. It will take tenacity and discipline, and perspiration to finish the work, he said. And then, in the spirit of King and Heschel, he said this: "God is asking: Do you have a clear sense of purpose? Do you have enough tenacity and discipline? Are you willing to sweat until you finish? The race is not given to the swift nor to the strong, but to the one who endures to the end." And he acknowledged that Dr. King knew he would not live to complete the work.

Then, he said something that I found so beautiful and inspiring. This is what Reverend Warnock preached last Shabbat to a group of mostly Black Christians and mostly White Jews: "I want to suggest that our life's project ought to be longer than our lifespan...We ought to give ourselves over to something that is larger than ourselves nowadays. Folks have a way of saying: I got to go find myself. And we go on some adventure trying to find ourselves. Might I suggest that perhaps if you give yourself over to something larger than yourself, you'll find yourself in the process."

He went on: Abraham Joshua Heschel, when he marched alongside Dr. King, said that he felt like his legs were praying. We need praying lips. And we need praying legs... You have the pastor of Ebenezer Church, where Marking King stood. A kid who grew up in public housing, standing alongside a young Jewish man, son of an immigrant, on our

way to represent this state in the Senate...We must build together this beloved community. And it takes all of us.”

It takes all of us. When we give ourselves over to the righteous cause larger than ourselves, we will find ourselves in the process. I am sure of it.

In Pirkei Avot, we learn the famous teaching:

לֹא עֲלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמֹּר, וְלֹא אֲתָהּ בֶן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה. ...
וְדַע מִתֵּן שְׂכָרְךָ שֶׁל צְדִיקִים לְעֵתִיד לְבֹא:

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say:

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it....
And know that the wages of those who act righteously now will yet be given in days to come.

The hopes of Reverend King and Rabbi Heschel live in us. Let us pray for the wisdom, the courage, the trust, and the dream we need to build that beloved community. Let us keep faith that if we do our part, our children, or theirs, may come to see the prophet's hope realized:

וַיִּגַּל כַּמַּיִם מִשֶּׁפֶט וְצִדְקָה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן:

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

אֲזַ יִמְלֵא שְׂחוֹק פִּינֵם וּלְשׁוֹנֵם רִנָּה
אֲזַ יֹאמְרוּ בַּגּוֹיִם הַגְּדִיל יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת עִם־אֱלֹהֵי:

Then their mouths will be filled with laughter, their tongues, with songs of joy.
And they shall say among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them!”

הַזֹּרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה בְּרִנָּה יִקְצְרוּ:
They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.
(Psalm 126)

That is the story our Torah calls us to hear today. May we hear it well.