Martin Luther King, Jr. Shabbat: January 15, 2022. Parashat Beshalach

Shabbat shalom. I’m Sally Jones. With Judy Pierotti, who is out of town and can’t join us in the sanctuary today, I co-chair our Social Justice Committee here at Beth Israel Center. We want to thank Rabbi Betsy for giving us the opportunity to speak in honor of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., on this anniversary of his birth.

And I want to thank both Rabbi Betsy and Josh Garoon for the very valuable help they’ve given me in preparing this talk.

In the spring of 1963, Black-led organizations, especially churches, launched a campaign against segregation in that most mercilessly segregated city—Birmingham, Alabama. The boycotts, sit-ins, marches and more provoked an uproar in white Birmingham, followed by a statement—a so-called “Call For Unity”—signed by 8 white clergy, one of them a rabbi. This statement tepidly acknowledged racial “problems,” disparaged the presence of “outsiders,” and trusted to patience, negotiation and “proper channels” for correction—that is to say, it offered a transparent prescription for many more years of “problems.”

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., prominent in campaign leadership, was arrested in April for demonstrating, and from his cell wrote a long and eloquent rebuttal to this do-nothing proposal—his famous Letter From Birmingham Jail. Early on, his letter says “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.” Later, it addresses these 8 clergy, in words Dr. King might reasonably use today, if he stood here among us:

“[M]y Christian and Jewish brothers… I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom… Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

[*You have copies here of Reverend King’s full letter, and at home, you can find it.]*

The demonstrations and backlash intensified, leading to events in May which not only stunned the city of Birmingham, but, broadcast on television, stunned America and the world—billy clubs, snarling dogs and fire hoses turned against nonviolent demonstrators. (If you are as old as I am, you saw this on television and you remember it!) Some change in the law eventually followed and some relief from segregation—but as events today, decades later, remind us, we have not nearly achieved “a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

Now, please, hold the thought of the slow and unsteady pace of progress toward racial justice, while we look at today’s parasha.

In Parashat Beshalach, we see the beginning of the journey launched in last week’s parasha, when Pharaoh tells Moses and Aaron, “Rise, go out from the midst of my people, both you and the Israelites” (12:31). Interestingly, in verse 17, we learn that the Israelites are not taking the shortest route to Canaan—a fortified coastal road. Instead, God leads them by a more roundabout way. Why? “God thought, ‘Lest the The people regret when they see battle and go back to Egypt.” The Israelites have escaped powerful oppressors, miraculously, and they have God ahead of them—in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night — showing the way to the land promised to them. Even so God knows that as yet the people do not have the heart for a fight.  
  
Soon the Israelites confirm this estimate of them. They see Pharaoh’s chariots advancing toward them, and “[t]hey sa[y] to Moses, ‘Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness? What is this you have done to us to bring us out of Egypt? Isn’t this the thing we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone, that we may serve Egypt, for it is better for us to serve Egypt than for us to die in the wilderness’” (11-12)? Moses reassures them, placing the burden of their deliverance on God, exhorting, “ Do not be afraid. Take your station and see the LORD’S deliverance that he will do for you today!...The LORD shall do battle for you, and you, you shall keep still” (13-14)!  
  
But does God mean to do allthe work, while the people stand by? Perhaps not. God rebukes Moses: “why do you cry out to me?” God wants the people to move forward, and so God instructs Moses, “Speak to the Israelites, that they journey onward… Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and split it apart, that the Israelites may come into the midst of the sea on dry land” (15-16). God will act, but the people and their leader must act as well. Moses must clear the path. And then the people must trust the path and walk into the sea.

Which they do, as we read.  Having reached safety, having seen Pharaoh’s forces drown in the closing waters, they celebrate their deliverance with triumphant song and with timbrels and dancing.

But soon enough the old fears return, as does recrimination, over and over. We read that in the Wilderness of Shur, where they find only bitter water, “the people murmured against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink’?” (15:24) Later, we read that in the Wilderness of Sin, “all the community of Israelites murmured against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness…’for you have brought us out to this wilderness to bring death by famine on all this assembly’.” (16:2-4) We read that at Rephidim “the people thirsted for water there, and the people murmured against Moses and said, ‘Why is it you brought us up from Egypt to bring death on me and my children and my livestock by thirst?’ “ (17: 3) God provides water in the Wilderness of Shur, quail in the Wilderness of Sin, and water again at Rephidim.

Yet at the close of this reading, the Israelites—who have sidestepped confrontation, who have regretted their deliverance and distrusted their leader—come under attack by Amalek and they now go into battle for themselves. Joshua chooses his fighting men. Moses stations himself on a hilltop, holding his staff high. And the Israelites prevail: “Joshua disabled Amalek and its people by the edge of the sword” (17:13). Biblical scholar Robert Alter comments that “this image of a sword-wielding Hebrew commander cutting down the enemy is the first representation of Israelites evincing martial prowess rather than watching as God performs wonders and does battle for them” (285). *(I’d like to note here that I’ve used Alter’s translation wherever I have quoted*.*)*

So, now, what can we learn today from holding together these different texts—Reverend King’s charge against injustice, and against sympathetic white people’s too-easy tolerance of injustice, and the Exodus story of fears and doubts among the Israelites as they start their journey to freedom? What may these texts tell us about our own lives and responsibilities? I think Dr. King tells us emphatically that we must address the racism deeply woven into the fabric of our society—our history, our law, our politics, our economy, our education, our neighborhoods. Nothing less will suffice. I think Beshalach reminds us that even with a longed-for destination ahead we can expect to doubt and to falter along the way, and even with strong and faithful leadership, each of us must take on a share of the work. Both texts call on us to persevere and to trust, even as they acknowledge that we will struggle to reach our most valuable goals.

Well, at Beth Israel Center, how are we pursuing a goal of racial justice? Many members do, and have long done, racial justice work as individuals. We know of service that any of us can undertake—committing time and money to Black-led organizations; seeking out Black-owned businesses to patronize; showing up at community events and lobbying for equity in education, health care, voting rights, plus much more.

While all of us can—I’d like to say should—make such individual efforts, we also havechosen to act as a community. Let’s note that while Beshalach brings our people out of Egypt, the Torah repeatedly tells us to remember how we suffered there and tells us to act rightly because of it. It tells us to do justice for The Other, remembering when in Egypt we were The Other. It calls us as a people, I believe, not only as a multitude of individuals. So this brings me to the work we have taken on as a kahal—Beth Israel Center’s partnership with the Nehemiah Center, in Confronting Racism.

Like Reverend King in Birmingham in 1963, we know in Madison today that “injustice is here.” To address some of it, in the fall of 2020 we offered members the opportunity to join a training group led by the Nehemiah Center’s Executive Vice President, Harry Hawkins, and Vice President of Research and Education, Karen Reece. Harry and Karen took on everyone who showed up—some 60 of us, at the start!—and they bravely accommodated all, even while adapting to Zoom’s limitations.

In the months since, with patience and good will, they have helped us to move from learning about a topic (a task solidly in our comfort zone), to recognizing how to work cross-culturally, a startling new challenge for most of us. We have come to realize that we can study, yes, but that to fight racism we need not so much to school our minds as to transform our selves.

Painfully for us, we’ve had to see that in our country’s history Jews, though perhaps more sensitized to oppression, have not in fact been the anti-racist community we like to imagine. We’ve had to recognize the advantages—barely or never perceived by us—granted to us by whiteness. We’ve had to consider whether or not we get to insist on our own way of tackling problems and working in a group. We’ve had to face up to our cluelessness about local Black leaders and Black-led organizations.

How has this process felt? At times puzzling, fidgety, complicated, uncomfortably revealing, frustrating, rewarding**..** Humbling. Have we found it easy? No. We brought to it an enormous range of attitudes and experiences, a NOT-so-useful set of classroom expectations, and an urgency about Doing Something. It took a lot of work just to recognize that we needed to make a new kind of change. Have we found it tidyand quick? No and no. Not understanding the sort of work we have in hand, we have chafed at tasks assigned us and complained that we saw no progress.

But now, however slowly, we havebegun to see our way. We have begun to acknowledge the scope of the challenge we face, but also to feel a sense of momentum and to see ahead the opportunity to go out as allies into the fight for racial justice. We have taken important steps, I think, toward the transformation we need. I’ll quote Rabbi Betsy here: *Only now are we beginning to realize that while being mentored into action in the community will mark progress and hopefully do some good, "we"**are also the project. Becoming an anti-racist is much broader than doing a project; it is about making the project of dismantling racism part of our conscious decision making in all areas of our lives, proactively and in how we respond to what we see and feel on an ongoing basis.*

Like the Israelites in Beshalach, we’ve had our doubts, our complaints and our struggles during this journey of Confronting Racism. But we can feel now that we have made progress, and we know that we have strong, and trustworthy leadership. We are defining our way forward. When we’re ready, we’ll bring to the kahal our new selves and our new plans, so that all of us can work together to help build Dr. King’s “positive peace which is the presence of justice.” And like the Israelites facing Amalek, we’ll be ready for the fight.

Shabbat shalom.