

Dr. Martin Luther King offers hope as America enters a new era

Both Judaism and science inform us that each of us was fashioned by a creative, transcendent power that gave rise to everything in the cosmos, including us. Humans reflect this power with unique qualities and abilities to transform the world with devices, technology and innovative ideas that have advanced human societies in ways that our ancestors could hardly imagine. Each of us possesses these unique qualities to help move this progress forward and to enrich the lives of others. Some people not only bless this world during their lifetime, but even after their days on earth are over, which is reflected in the wish for our loved ones “Yehey zichrono l’vracha” (“May their memory be a blessing”). Such is the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, whose birth we celebrate this month around the world and whose memory is a blessing to all mankind.

Each of us is may be part of this blessing by picking up the baton and carrying on Dr. King’s heroic struggle against injustice, which he in turn received from Moses and the Jewish prophets who challenged injustice and abuse of power in their day. At a time in our society when America seems to have lost its way, and the future seems uncertain, let us be inspired by the words of Dr. King who observed “There comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right”. He also famously noted “He who accepts evil without protesting against it, is really cooperating with it.”

At a time when millions of Americans are led by demagogues to dispute climate change, deny reproductive freedom to women, seek a theocratic tyranny, and even challenge our democracy itself, we must be strong and remember that although Dr. Martin Luther King is revered today, in his own lifetime, he faced overwhelming odds and challenges. He was spied upon by the FBI, his life was constantly in danger, and he took great risks in leading a people, whose future was far from certain, out of the wilderness. Like Moses, as he predicted, he never reached the Promised Land, but his people achieved greater equality, even though we still live in an imperfect world, where the deranged can easily get their hands on lethal weapons. One such weapon took the life of Dr. King, but an assassin’s bullet could never silence his powerful voice for freedom and love among all people.

Dr. King was supported in his heroic mission to transform our nation by one of the greatest religious figures of American history, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, rabbi, theologian, social activist, ecumenical leader and modern-day prophet. Emerging out of the holocaust, which claimed the lives of his family, millions of others, and the world as he knew it, Heschel knew first-hand the dangers of the twin evils of abusive government and the sin of silence. Despite intense opposition from entrenched power and multitudes who feared change, Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King united to provide a powerful, spiritual foundation to the civil

rights and anti-war movements that changed forever the way we think of our nation and continues to inspire freedom loving people around the world.

With poetic language, prophetic insight and intrepid zeal, both King and Heschel brought moral authority and ecumenical fervor to the important struggles of their day. To his critics who told him to limit his activities to prayers in the synagogue, Rabbi Heschel responded that when he marched with Dr. King in Selma he felt as if he was “praying with his legs.” He warned that indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself because it normalizes, condones and accepts evil itself and makes us all complicit.

Rabbi Heschel was not simply an “observant” Jew who “observed” what was going on in the world; he was a “rabbi rouser” who emulated the great prophets of long ago to “rouse” us from our slumber and to champion Jewish values.

Similarly, Dr. King leveled his most impassioned fulmination against religious moderates, who advised him to wait and accept things as they are until the time is right to speak up. Writing from a jail cell, Dr. King accused such “leaders” as condoning and accepting evil by their silence.

In a divided nation, it is time to heal the political divide today. As Jews, we must speak out against intolerance and anti-Semitism in our own political party, in the sacred scripture of any religion, and in the United Nations and the international community which has made a pariah of the Jewish state with their anti-Israel diatribes and malicious resolutions against the only democracy, bastion of freedom and our loyal ally in the Middle East. Dr. King strongly supported Israel and castigated anti-Zionists as anti-Semites who deny the right of Jews to self-determination in their own homeland in a world where Jews need a safe haven after centuries of persecution.

So let us honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, who said that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” and the legacy of Rabbi Heschel, by uniting with those of all faiths and backgrounds, to further the Jewish role as a light to the nations, as we pray with our legs for a brighter future. In this way, each of us can help make Dr. Martin Luther King’s memory a blessing.