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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday, January 14, 2021 ~ Parsha: Beshalach

Martin Luther King, Jr and the Religious Heritage of America

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

On Monday, our nation will pause and honor Martin Luther King Jr. A Federal holiday in honor of an individual is a rare honor. We have had many great Americans who have played a role in elevating our national discourse and policies. But MLK may have been the most influential.

I am not a professional historian, so I am not the one to provide a full assessment of his achievements. Having read all sorts of books about his life and work, I cannot help but be inspired and impressed by his humanity, his humility and courage. He was larger than life, and changed the direction of American history. He was revered by just about everyone, including those whose grandparents probably despised him. Perhaps given different circumstances, he might have chosen a different path. MLK was a significant religious scholar and theologian in his own right. He was natural born leader and charismatic speaker, and a successful pastor of his own church. But a unique set of circumstances set him on a path that literally changed America. So how did he do this? The answer has to do with the unique religious heritage of America which was better understood in the mid-20th century than it is today. Let me explain.

One of the great leaders of the 20th century was Mahatma Gandhi. Sadly, what many Americans know about him is solely through Richard Attenborough's award-winning movie about him in the early 1980's. What always bothered me about that otherwise brilliant movie was that it did not fully address what I always understood to be the key to Gandhi's actual triumph. It was more than just his strategy of non-violence, though it would be foolish to disregard the role of that tactic. It was the ideological underpinning of that strategy. Gandhi understood that the British occupation of a country as large, diverse, and historically divided as India would entail the regular violation of the laws and values that the British normally upheld. By challenging

them in the way that he did, by making them take actions against non-violent resisters which ultimately involved tremendous violence on the part of the British authorities, as well as the media attention that Gandhi's protests encouraged among the British public, the change that Gandhi hoped to achieve did indeed occur. His activism started a real conversation among the British public and elected officials. And within a few years the gap between their values, and the reality of the occupation of the Indian subcontinent was too much to ignore. And real change took place.

In many ways, MLK's success modeled that of Gandhi, yet tailored it for the American public. Gandhi, having been educated in England, understood the society, its values and norms, and believed in the basic decency of its citizens. So too with King. At a certain point he came to understand that change could be achieved in America by appealing not only to politicians and the justice system as did his predecessors in the civil rights movement, but to the Judeo-Christian heritage that animated the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, the ideas that spoke to the freedom, the worth, the dignity, and the value of all people. And then he challenged not just Bull Connors and his ilk, but millions of Americans watching the events unfold on their TV screens to ask themselves: do those values apply to Black people? And if not, why?

Historically they did not apply. Race has always been the great divide in America and remains so to this day. What MLK did was to make us face the truth that hatred of the other, and the laws that we created to enforce that hatred are simply not consistent with those higher values, and our religious heritage. And when too many Americans could no longer maintain the charade, change began to occur. He challenged us to rise above what was familiar and acceptable and even innate and natural and to achieve something higher. He understood that whether we like it or not America was founded with a distinct religious heritage, which makes similar demands upon its adherents.

Think about it. The Bible tells us at least 40 different times to not oppress the poor, the infirm, or the orphaned. Because left on our own, too many will do so because that is what comes naturally to human beings.

Though shall not murder, though shall not steal, (let's not even get into the subject of adultery): these are part of the human experience and we have to train ourselves and encourage each other not to do these things. It is only our religious heritage that

teaches that they should be avoided at all cost in order to create a better community for all. Every single day, religion in general and Judaism in particular, challenge us to rise above that which is easy and familiar and to create a better world.

By appealing to the collective religious conscience of average Americans, by appealing to the decency of the average American and pointing out the gap between our beliefs and our deeds, much of the change that MLK sought was eventually achieved. And we are a better nation as a result.

As many will point out on Monday, much has been achieved, but there is still a long way to go. They are correct. If we want to honor the life and legacy of MLK, let's remember the teaching of our Rabbis who taught, "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you free from doing your share."

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner