

## *Eulogizing Martin Luther King*

Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. The Jewish community of Greater Washington convened a memorial service on April 7, 1968 attended by over two thousand people. Because of my closeness to Martin Luther King, I was asked to deliver the eulogy. Excerpts follow:

צדיק אחד מעמיד את העולם על יטנו. "One righteous man keeps the world standing firmly on its foundation."

Martin Luther King was the righteous man of our generation. Before he came to bless us with his life, our sensitivity to moral issues had been dulled by the indulgences of prosperity. Our vision of a national purpose had been dimmed by the bright glare of self-righteous affluence. Prejudice, discrimination, poverty, ignorance paraded openly in the land, but we saw them not. We heard them not.

Then Martin Luther King entered our world. He came with a heart large for compassion, feet strong for marching, and a voice golden for inspiration. And he came with a black skin, the very color of which made all poverty more visible and all injustice more conspicuous.

צדיק בא לעולם טוביה בא להעולם. "When a righteous man comes into the world, goodness comes into the world." He brought with him the message of goodness, of righteousness.

He made us look at ourselves in the light of eternity. He made us stand firm on our foundations. He showed us the gap between America's promise and America's fulfillment. He would not let us forget that there were human beings who were being treated less than human. From bus to waiting room to lunchroom to hotel room to voting booth to slum house to ghetto school to university campus to employment offices, he

confronted us with the America we had refused to believe existed.

He shattered our illusions, but he restored our dream — the American dream. He helped us to see that our fundamental goal was not to make the world safe for democracy, but rather to make democracy safe for the world. And in so doing, he became our conscience. His pulpit was the street, his congregation all mankind, and his message universal.

And that is why he was struck down. The forces of hatred always seek to destroy our noblest symbols. But they seek in vain. The Pharaohs, the Inquisitors, the Hitlers, the Oswalds, the assassins never learn that the symbol is more than a man's body. It is a man's life, his work, his deeds, his values. The destruction of the body only serves to enhance the value of the spirit. The wanton taking of life only generates new life for the forces of good. The symbol in death becomes more than the symbol in life. It assumes a new life, a new mission of its own. Freed from the frailties of the human body, it soars to new heights of influence. As history has preserved the *מעשים טובים*, (the good works) of the martyrs of all generations, so will it enshrine this martyr, this symbol of humanity felled by inhumanity.

Martin Luther King would have us build a society which will know that man's spiritual needs cannot be isolated from his material needs, that the real blight of our time is not poverty, but the nation which tolerates poverty, not unemployment, but the nation which passively accepts human stultification, not the impassioned racist, but the dispassionate average man who sits as a spectator high above the arena of life.

He would have us build a society which seeks protection not in armored cars, but in the impenetrable armor of justice, a society where men know that not to quell riots but to fulfill rights is their ultimate purpose, and not to cool the ghetto, but to transform it is their ultimate challenge.

Dr. King would also speak to us here assembled as Jews. For he was steeped in the knowledge of our Bible, inspired by

our perseverance through history, and guided by the convictions of our prophets. In his last address, he talked of having been to the mountaintop, and like Moses, having seen the Promised Land. He hinted, perhaps in some kind of premonition, that he had shown the way, but that he might never be privileged to enter.

There is a remarkable affinity between the fate, the history, and the goals of Negro and Jew. The Jewish experience in Egypt set the stage for human freedom. Whenever and wherever men struggle to free themselves from the yoke of bondage, the drama of redemption of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt is reenacted.

But if in our contemporary reenactment, the Negroes are the children of Israel and Martin Luther King is their Moses, then we the Jews of America are confronted with a major question. Who are we? What role do we play? How can a Jew hear the word "ghetto" and not experience a special wince of pain? How can a Jew say, as all too many have said to me recently, "I am through with supporting the civil rights cause," or as someone said to me yesterday, "The civil rights movement died with Martin Luther King."

The civil rights movement was not the personal possession of Martin Luther King. The civil rights movement does not belong to Negroes alone. It belongs to all who make it their cause. Let no one try to take the civil rights movement away from us. Let no Jew try to read us out of the civil rights movement. We do not engage in social action to help others. We engage in it to help ourselves, to fulfill the dictates of Jewish ethics, to live the lessons of our history.

This Friday, with the commencement of Passover, we shall relive the most important lesson of our history — God destroys the evil society and redeems the enslaved. Not our fathers alone in some distant past, but each of us in the present is a slave so long as any person is enslaved in body or mind or soul.

The cause to which Martin Luther King dedicated his life did not end with his death. It was ennobled by his death, as it

was advanced by his life. As we sit around our tables this Passover, he will be there with us. He has bridged for us a distance of more than 3,000 years. The Moses of the Negro has invested the Moses of the Jew with new meaning, just as the plight of the Negro has given new understanding to the eternal task of the Jewish people — *לתקן עולם במלכות שמי*. "To perfect the world under the kingdom of God."