

King, Heschel, Obama & YOU!

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On this Shabbat, we begin a new book of the Torah, a new story of the Jewish people, and in our nation a new story is unfolding as well. While it's a story that repeats itself cyclically, there is always something new to see and learn. This year, the remarkable confluence of history in our parasha and in America is overwhelming.

This past week we observed the *yahrzeit* of our great teacher and activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Monday we celebrate the birth of the great teacher and activist Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. And the very next day we will witness the inauguration of the 44th President of the United States of America, Barack Hussein Obama. The son of a Kenyan man and a woman from Texas is moving into the White House with his wife and two daughters. The future First lady's great-great-grandfather Jim Robinson was a slave on South Carolina plantation. The Obama family is moving into a White House that was built by slaves of West African descent. America is starting a new book.

As I have been reflecting upon this mystical confluence of events these past weeks, I can't help but conclude that: Dr. King took us to a certain point; Rabbi Heschel took us to a certain point; and President Obama can only take us so far. It's up to each and every one of us to tell the story, to ask the questions and to turn our dreams into reality.

The story of the Exodus, the movement from slavery to freedom, is told again and again, year after year. We act it out at the seder, we study it in depth as we read the Torah...every year we revisit the story and we ask ourselves have we left Egypt, have we left behind the crippling chains that bind us to oppression, injustice and suffering.

Every year we read the story and descend with Jacob into Egypt. We suffer the oppression of Pharaoh. We groan with Israel and struggle with Moses. As we read and experience the pain of slavery, we **know** that Israel will reach the Promised Land. We watch Moses and Israel stumble but we have **the certainty of faith** that the dreams of our people will be fulfilled. And, as we live the story, over and over again, we are reminded that the journey is not without its struggles, it is not without its losses, it is not without suffering. It is filled with ups and downs.

In our parasha, when Moses arrives in Egypt and shows the Israelites signs of God's power behind him, the Israelites are happy and receive Moses with reverence. As it says in Chapter 4: Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. Aaron repeated all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and he performed the signs in the sight of the people, and the people were convinced. When they heard that the Lord had taken note of the Israelites and that God had seen their plight, they bowed low in homage.”(4:29-31)

And, then, all too quickly, they suffer disappointments, Moses suffers setbacks and the people's suffering fuels their anger. In the very next chapter, just a few verses later, we learn that Moses' and Aaron's first meeting with Pharaoh did not go well. Pharaoh orders harder labor for the Israelite slaves. The Israelites turn to Moses and Aaron with curses: “May the Lord look upon

you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us.”(Ex 5:21)

Every year we read the story and watch Moses struggle as a leader. In our parasha, he goes from a man who is not sure who he is and who God is, to the mouthpiece of God speaking to Pharaoh, breaking down the barriers of oppression. Moses becomes with voice of liberation calling out—*Shalach et Ami!* Let my people go!

The imagery of the Exodus infused the speeches of Dr. King, and the God of the Exodus inspired a friendship between King and Heschel. When Heschel first met King in 1963 at the Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago, Heschel opened his speech by saying, “At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses ... The outcome of that summit meeting has not yet come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed.”

As every child asks at some point on the journey...*are we there yet?* Where are we going? When are we going to get there? We can't help but ask it ourselves. Is this the Promised Land? Are we living in the America of our dreams? As Barack Obama stands at the podium Tuesday and takes his place as the 44th President of the United States of America, we can be pretty certain that we have not reached the Promised Land. We are standing in a new place, but we have great work to do.

Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us the importance of the journey. In his identification with Moses and his intuitive sense of destiny, he taught us also the relative importance of the leader.

In his last speech, the night before he was assassinated, King prophetically invoked the imagery of the Torah: “I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!”

As we watch the character of Moses develop in the Torah, as we read the commentaries and see the elevation of Moses in our tradition, we can not forget what King reminds us. Not even Moses, the greatest of all prophets reached the Promised Land. What does this teach us? Does it teach us that every leader, even the greatest are destined to fall and fail? Yes and No. Every leader will someday fall. Every term eventually expires, our time our earth is limited, the time in office as well...but, the greater lesson is that our story, the story of the Jewish people and the story of humanity played out in this great land, is not about the great leader; it is about the great people, the great values that drive them on and inspire them, the great power that is found when no man or woman stands alone but is joined by her neighbors in the march toward freedom.

This week we celebrate the great leaders of our nation—Dr King, Rabbi Heschel and the newest leader President-Elect Obama. Each one stands in the place of Moses and calls us all to task.

I want to conclude with a segment of the Nominee Obama's words as he invoked Dr. King and the march toward the Promised Land.

“This country of ours has more wealth than any nation, but that's not what makes us rich. We have the most powerful military on Earth, but that's not what makes us strong. Our universities and our culture are the envy of the world, but that's not what keeps the world coming to our shores.

Instead it is that American spirit—that American promise—that pushes us forward even when the path is uncertain; that binds us together in spite of our differences; that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen; that better place around the bend.

That promise is our greatest inheritance. It's a promise I make to my daughters when I tuck them in at night, and a promise that you make to yours—a promise that has led immigrants to cross oceans and pioneers to travel west; a promise that led workers to picket lines and women to reach for the ballot.

And it is that promise that 45 years ago today, brought Americans from every corner of this land to stand together on a Mall in Washington before Lincoln's Memorial and hear a young preacher from Georgia speak of his dream... [and] what the people heard ...people of every creed and color, from every walk of life—is that America, our destiny is inextricably linked. That together, our dreams can be one.

'We can not walk alone,' the preacher cried. 'And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.'

We couldn't turn back at the edge of the Sea of Reeds. We couldn't turn back at Sinai. We couldn't turn away from the dream of the Promised Land and we can not today, either. For many of us America is the land that guarantees us the ideals that we hold dear and our people has always held dear—freedom, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope.

As we watch President Obama walk to the podium Tuesday morning, we can not forget where we have come as a nation. We can not forget the dreams and visions of past leaders. And, as we listen to President Obama and hear his charge to our country, we can not just sit back and wait for him to take us to the Promised Land. It is up to each and every one of us to ask ourselves the questions that Moses asked of himself: who am I, what am I put on this earth to accomplish and what great Power or ideals call me to do good work.

When Rabbi Heschel was invited by Dr. King to March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, he took up the charge. He said of that experience: “For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”

May the prayers we utter in this Beit El, this House of God, never stop inspiring our limbs to action. May we each remember this morning the power of great leaders, the promise of great visions and the potential of a nation united in its ideals. Every year, we experience suffering, every year we march toward freedom, every year we enter the Promised Land. May we be inspired by the stories of our tradition, the dreams of our preachers and the vision of our President to move this country and the World to a greater version of itself. As Barack Obama reminded us: that is the true genius of America—that America can change. Our union can be perfected. And what we have already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.”(acceptance speech, Nov 4, 2008 in Chicago) May we each be inspired to do our part to bring about a better tomorrow.

As Psalm 27 concludes: *Lulei he'emanti lir'ot b'tuv Adonai b'erezt chayim. Kavei el Adonai Hazak v'ya'amezt libekha, v'kavei el Adonai.* Yet I have faith that I shall surely see Adonai's goodness in the land of the living. Hope in Adonai. Be strong, take courage and hope in Adonai.