

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah – Mikaetz

"I had a Dream ..." Every child growing up in America knows these words. These were the prophetic words of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as he implored Americans to see in each other the divinity that resides in each one of us. He spoke to a world that would only more fully understand his message after he was shot. Dr. King's message calling for equal justice for all people has grown from being the call of the rabble to the voice in the White House. His message calling for a prophetic ministry of equal justice for all Americans and not just those enfranchised and entitled was a revolution that changed the face of America. Even while we have elevated Dr. King to the status of hero, giving him a memorial holiday as great as the greatest of our presidents, I still fear that Dr. King's dream has been misinterpreted, and without his clarifying voice, we know that his message has been twisted and perverted to suit the needs of particular narrow single interest groups, which was never his intention. Too often the greatest of our dreams end up being heard or translated in the most difficult of ways. The unintended consequences of our dreams are both blessings and curses, and often both have little to do with the original intention of the dream.

The Biblical Joseph was a dreamer. He dreamt that his family would bow before him. Joseph was an interpreter of dreams. He translated the dreams of the butler and the baker in prison. He was then called upon to translate the dreams of Pharaoh. His interpretations so impressed Pharaoh that he became a national hero; second in command of all of Egypt. He accurately predicted the fourteen year future of feast and famine and saved Egypt. We know that Joseph reunites with his brothers, and eventually his father. The beginning of this reunion tale happens this week. While the week's portion ends without Joseph revealing his identity to his brothers, he is quite obviously torn apart over seeing them and hearing news from home. It is at this point every year that I get stuck with a perplexing question. If Joseph really missed his father and brother Benjamin, why did he make no effort to contact them? Certainly he was unable to while in prison, but once elevated to the 2nd highest position in Egypt, why did he make no effort? Some scholars argue that he had to wait for the family to come bow before him, so as to fulfill the dreams of his youth. Some argue that he was actually complicit with his brothers (even though they did not know this), for had he not been sold into slavery, he could not fulfill his destiny and save Egypt. Coming from a tradition that places a lot of emphasis on the right and obligation of the individual to self determine his/her path, I find both of these arguments spurious, at best.

I think Joseph licked his wounds and moved on. The thought of seeing his brothers again held no interest for him, and clouded even his interest in seeing his father or Benjamin. When the brothers appeared, he wrestled with what to do and how to respond. He even tried to kidnap Benjamin and keep him at the palace. Ultimately, as we will see next week, he welcomes his

brothers and his father to Egypt and settles them away from most Egyptians, but in the best region of the land. I used to think that in doing so, he caused an affront to all of Egypt. I used to blame Joseph for the rebellion against Israelites that led to our enslavement. As I have spent so much time working in the civil rights world, side by side with Martin King III, and a host of first generation King disciples (of all ethnicities), I have changed my mind. It was not Joseph's favoritism that cost us so dearly, it was his family who abused his message that caused our downfall. Joseph saved Egypt. His family's abuse of his status and his message destroyed it. We will read that while Egyptians were selling themselves into slavery to obtain grain for their own tables, Jacob's family was in Goshen, providing for the want of the child – and children want everything. And, while I have made this point before, I always rested blame on Joseph's shoulders. I have learned that his message and intentions were just, but his family's may not have been. In the same sense, the infighting between Dr. King's children and the portrayal of Dr. King as speaking exclusively to Christians, or some how justifying reverse racism is antithetical to his call for justice. To hear someone say, "I walked with Dr. King," and then use that as the launch pad for a message that elevates one faith or one people over another serves only to make a great leader turn over in his grave.

But, certainly we all do this. We take advantage of each other's dreams. We hear the parts of messages that we want to hear, disregarding the parts that do not fit our agenda. Those of us who speak or write publicly live in fear that our words will be taken and used out of context, or that people will affiliate the mis-context of our words for their personal gain. And more traumatically, each of us knows the pain of speaking privately and having our most heartfelt words misused against us. I believe that each of us has a vision of a more perfect world. I also believe that too many of us see that more perfect world as one in which we hold the controls. I also believe that too often we take advantage of other people in trying to make our dream come true. I have a dream. It is the same dream of salvation that Joseph interpreted for Egypt, and the same dream that Dr. King had for America. There are years of feast and famine before us; years of blessings tempered by years of curse. I know this. My dream affirms that if we do not find a way to better honor each other's dreams and each other's dignities; where we twist the messages of justice to insure our own entitlements, we will know the famine of Egypt and the fires of hell. Share in my dream and affirm the truth and value in the dreams of those who seek to heal our world. May this Shabbat see us listening and responding with a greater sense of justice – and, as I have been prone to say of late, not with a sense of "just us." Shabbat Shalom.