

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah - Shemot

"I have been to the mountain top, and I have seen the promised land!" These are words that could have come from the mouth of a great many leaders throughout history and folklore. Any person with vision and intention who has struggled with matters of justice has had the moment when the light bulbs start flashing inside his head, and he knows he has been to the mountain top. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of it, he was joined in this message by his good friend Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Gandhi spoke of it. Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson spoke of it. The Archbishop Desmond Tutu and David Ben Gurion spoke of it. It is the vision of the ancient biblical prophets. In not quite so literal terms, it is the understanding of all leaders who, having been held back, found the path to freedom. This week, our Torah cycle begins the story of Moses' journey to the mountain top.

Moses was born into a people in captivity. He avoided the fate of death that Pharaoh mandated upon all male Israelite children, as his nursemaid saved his life. He found himself in Pharaoh's court as Pharaoh's adopted grandson. Growing up in privilege, he was never satisfied watching some "have" while others suffered, having nothing. We know the rest of the story. Moses will ascend to the mountain top; at least four times. He will see the burning bush, receive the Ten Commandments (twice), and then at the end of Torah, he will ascend the mountain top to see the land that he would never enter. Moses coined the term for us all, and in doing so, gave us the challenge that stands between us and the messianic age. So many have been to the mountain top, of these, some have actually seen the promised land, but, as yet, none have entered it. The mountain top is the launch pad for the Messianic Age, the age of peace. We know what it will look like, but we have yet to figure out how to get there.

We do know this much: the path to peace must lead us to see each other with new eyes, engage with newly opened arms, and learn from each other with open minds. We look for signs that this next trip to the mountain top will be the one that sees us complete the journey to the other side. The convergence of several events should make us take a step back to gain some perspective.

The conflict in Israel and Gaza is a tragedy for a great many reasons; most of all because there are countless Israeli and Palestinian lives being ripped from the earth in an effort not to preserve but to destroy. The world has picked sides based on a biased media, and while the government of Israel and the leadership of Hamas are being blamed back and forth, the reality is that people are dying while the world postures politically. We all want it to end. We want there to be peace. We need a path. We have a path, but it sometimes gets lost in the midst of the anger and violence that fills our news and hence, our heads.

We know that path to peace. The path follows the footsteps of two giants in the movement for Civil Rights in America. Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel walked arm in arm teaching the country the message of dignity and equality. They made us pay attention to the oppressed and suffering in society. This week, we acknowledged the death anniversary of Rabbi Heschel, saved from the Holocaust / Shoah, he taught the world to live with intention, understanding every moment as a blessing. Dr. King taught us to look to each other with dignity and respect. This coming week, we will celebrate his birthday.

It was 1969 when the United States Supreme Court finally declared unconstitutional the act of making inter-racial marriage a criminal act. Regardless of his politics, the Whitehouse is about to welcome a man whose parents' marriage had not yet been constitutionally protected in many states in our nation. Certainly the work of Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel paved the way for this miraculous change and growth. We are now about to welcome to the presidency one who has a reputation of doing just what these great men taught, reaching across traditional lines to build a consensus to move all people forward. Barack Obama's presidency is historic, success or failure, because for the first time in our country, we now have proof that there is an "American dream;" we still have a long way to go, but no one is barred from leadership because of race, any more.

When I juxtapose the conflict in Gaza with the incredible hope that the remembrances of this week and the upcoming inauguration, I have to believe that it is time, beyond time--for that [perspective seeking](#) step back. We have before us the blessing and the curse, and the path and paradigm for both. Making this choice even more pronounced is the coincidence that this week we begin this new book of the Torah (Exodus), and begin the journey from oppression into freedom. President elect Obama is no Moses, and we do not know whether he will measure up to Dr. King or Rabbi Heschel. We do know that the moment he becomes President, the world will change. The question before us will make us choose which path we wish to pursue. Do we pick sides making a conflict around the world even worse? Do we join arm in arm reaching across aisles to create relationships? Monday is also my son's 21st birthday. As he truly becomes an adult, I have to have hope for our future. Shabbat Shalom.