



## Martin Luther King And The Exodus Narrative

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By: Rabbi Saul J. Berman      Wednesday, January 17, 2007

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The national commemoration of the life of Martin Luther King Jr., which we marked earlier this week, always falls in the cycle of Torah reading that tells of the enslavement in Egypt of the Jewish people and their subsequent liberation.

Black clergy and religious laity of the 1960's saw the biblical story of the Exodus as the paradigm for their own struggle for liberation from bias and second-class citizenship – the residue of their enslavement in America. They sought a Moses who could lead them into the promised land of social, economic and political equality. For many, the anticipated liberator emerged in the person of Martin Luther King Jr.

King came to public prominence as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in January 1957. Just eleven years later, on April 4, 1968, having led a civil rights revolution in America and being a Nobel Prize laureate, he was assassinated.

During his lifetime King was a favorite of Jewish leadership, and no wonder: He was a strong supporter of Israel and other Jewish causes. Early in the struggle for Soviet Jewry, in November 1963, he raised his voice and said, "I cannot stand idly by as an American Negro and not be concerned about what happens to my brothers and sisters who happen to be Jews in Soviet Russia. For their problem is my problem."

Despite the emergence in the mid-1960's of significant anti-Israel and anti-Semitic voices among younger black leaders, King struggled to sustain the alliance between blacks and Jews, and to encourage support of Israel within the black community. He recognized early on that professed anti-Zionism was just a cover for deeper malevolence.

My personal involvement with Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement was most intense in March 1965 in Selma, Alabama. King had issued a call for help in the last stages of a voter registration drive for blacks in Selma and for participants in the projected march from Selma to Montgomery.

The preceding months had seen an escalation of Southern resistance to civil rights demonstrations and an increase in violence – including the murders of Jimmy Lee Jackson and Reverend James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister from Detroit. Prior

attempts at a march from Selma to Montgomery had been stopped by Alabama State Troopers who attacked the marchers with whips, dogs and rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire.

I was then the rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, the Orthodox synagogue in Berkeley, California. I explained to the congregation why I felt impelled by Torah to join in this civil rights effort.

After we learn, in *Parshat Shemot*, that Moshe was in fact nursed and raised by his mother Yocheved before being returned to the daughter of Pharaoh, the Torah tells us three short stories about Moshe and injustice that help us understand why he will eventually become the liberator and leader of the Jewish people.

First, Moshe, a bystander, intervenes to rescue a fellow Jew by killing an Egyptian taskmaster. Then he intervenes a second time in a dispute that is not his, to separate two Jews, one of whom is about to strike the other.

In consequence of that second intervention, Moshe is compelled to flee Egypt, and ends up wandering in the Midianite desert. There he comes upon yet a third instance of injustice as shepherds prevent the daughters of Yitro from watering their flocks.

Moshe understands that even though none of the parties to this conflict are Jews, and that he could stand aside and not risk being accused of having caused the evil, his Jewish responsibility is to do what he can to prevent the perpetration of injustice.

The Torah later spells out, in dozens of different *mitzvot*, these three layers of responsibility to deter and remedy injustice. Indeed, Rambam, in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (III:27), considers this goal, the establishment of a just social order, to be one of the three central purposes of the Torah.

So, on Tuesday night, March 16, 1965, at the start of the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar II, 5725, I set out with a group of four other rabbis on a flight to Atlanta with a connecting flight to Montgomery, to be followed by a car ride to Selma, Alabama. I carried with me food to break the Fast of Esther the following evening, and a *megillah* to read on the evening and morning of Purim.

Our driver on the ride to Selma was an uncle of Jimmy Lee Jackson. He filled in for us some of the details of his nephew's tragic death. A few weeks earlier, at a demonstration that turned violent, Jimmy saw state troopers beating his mother with truncheons. He leaped forward and, acting non-violently, covered her body with his own to protect her.

The troopers beat him mercilessly and demanded he get off so that they could resume beating his mother. He remained above her in a protective stance. An officer held a gun to his back and told him to get off or he would shoot. Jimmy did not move and the officer shot him point blank. The troopers then refused to call an ambulance for a long period of time.

When an ambulance finally did arrive and Jimmy was loaded in, no care was provided to him as the vehicle traveled slowly, observing all traffic regulations, on the way to the hospital. By the time the ambulance got to the hospital it was too late to save Jimmy, who died soon thereafter.

I did not know until much later that during Jimmy's funeral, at Brown's Chapel in Selma, the minister quoted verses from the Book of Esther calling upon those with governmental connections to use their influence to save the blacks, as Mordecai had called upon Esther to do on behalf of the Jewish people of Persia.

Soon after our arrival in Selma, I experienced first hand the violent atmosphere that permeated the city. We were asked to join a march to the home of the mayor of Selma. There we were arrested and put on buses to be transported for booking.

During the ride we were told to remain silent as a line of troopers stood in the aisle of the bus. Seeing a glint of kindness in the eyes of a trooper standing near me, I commented softly, "I'm sure that you don't really want to be doing this."

His swing of the nightstick missed my eye by a fraction of an inch and made a deep indentation in the metal back of the seat in front of me.

That evening, a colleague who had not been arrested realized that I had neither food nor *megillah* with me. He found my luggage at the home to which I had been assigned as a guest, and brought both to me at the jail. The entire group of detainees, clergy of many religions and denominations and laypeople of many races, fell silent to hear the reading of the Book of Esther in Hebrew with a *meturgaman*, a simultaneous translation into English.

The drama of the biblical narrative and its relevance to the experiences of other groups – evil individuals venting their hatred against an entire people, defeated by good persons assuming responsibility to resist, aided by clear, albeit hidden, Divine intervention – spoke powerfully to Jew and non-Jew alike.

Later that night the rabbis in the group were asked to come out of the pen in which we were being held. A group of Jews who lived in Selma wanted to meet with all of us, but in particular they wanted to speak with one of the Reform rabbis, the director of the Hillel Foundation at the University of California at Berkeley, Rabbi Abraham Gumbiner (yes, he bore the name – and was in fact a direct descendant – of the Magen Avraham.) In his first position out of rabbinical school, some thirty years earlier, Rabbi Gumbiner had served as spiritual leader of the small Reform temple in Selma, Alabama.

The delegation from the local Jewish community demanded that we pack up and leave Selma as soon as possible. They described how the presence of Northern Jewish agitators, particularly rabbis, was promoting hatred of local Jews and making their economic and social lives very difficult to sustain.

We reminded them that it was only twenty years after the Holocaust and that we as Jews had condemned the European non-Jewish population whose silence in the face of Nazi persecution had made the extermination of six million Jews possible.

Were we then as a people to hypocritically enact that same silence in the face of injustice toward others? Would we not, through such inaction, be retroactively justifying the self-interest of the pope and of Protestant religious leaders whose concern for the economic and social security of their parishioners led them to silence and even to collaboration?

The meeting was tense and painful. We did not view their situation lightly, and attempted to explore with them how the broader Jewish community might be helpful. They said they would get us out of jail immediately if we agreed to leave town.

We declined, but could not persuade them of the justice of our position. Our parting was filled with hugs and anger. Early the next day we were released on our own recognizance.

On Friday an even larger group, numbering close to three hundred, attempted again to march to the home of the mayor of Selma. The entire group was arrested and transported to the prison yard, since there was not enough room inside for all of us. We were kept standing in rows with no water and no bathroom facilities for many hours until, at evening, we were brought to a large hall.

As *Shabbat* began the rabbis in the group began to lead an explanatory service followed by the singing of *zemirot*. Large numbers of young people slowly came forward to identify themselves as Jews and to participate in the service and the singing. There was a palpable sense of Jewish pride as it became clear how many of the civil rights activists present were Jews, albeit most of them were not generally so identified.

At that moment I was reminded of a teaching I had heard in the name of Rabbi Abraham Yitzchak Hacohen Kook, the first chief rabbi of Palestine in the mandate period.

Rav Kook said that there are two different forms of rebellion against Torah. There is *chutzpah tata'ah*, lower rebellion, which is expressed in a person's refusal to yield to the material constraints demanded by Torah. Such a person violates the law for the sake of his or her personal pleasure and gratification and ought properly to bear the consequences of his or her sins.

There is, on the other hand, *chutzpah ila'ah*, higher rebellion, which is expressed in the abandonment of Torah by a person who is seeking spiritual elevation and ethical refinement but fails to find those qualities in Orthodoxy.

This latter rebellion, said Rav Kook, is not the fault of the sinner, but of the community, which has failed to adequately model the ways in which Torah is in fact the ideal path to such spiritual elevation and ethical refinement.

The next morning the police decided to release us and said they would bus us back to Brown's Chapel. I indicated to someone that I would walk rather than ride on *Shabbat*. Word rapidly spread through the group that there was a rabbi present who could not ride, and without vote or deliberation the entire group insisted that they would walk with me.

To the dismay of the police, over three hundred people walked back from the prison to the safety of the black neighborhood, accompanied by a phalanx of empty buses and police cars.

It was an exhilarating moment of mutual respect, achieved through engagement in a common struggle to affirm the shared human dignity of every person.

By the time I got back to Berkeley a few days later, I had experienced a new understanding, additional layers of meaning, in the Torah's narrative of the three stories about Moshe.

In the first story Moshe shows he understands that sometimes one must be ready to combat evil even with the use of force. The State of Israel has brought renewed awareness of this lesson to the Jewish people.

The second story reminds us that not all evil is the same, that sometimes force is not called for, but we need to raise our voices against those who create unwarranted conflict and divisiveness. Indeed, sometimes *tochacha*, verbal chastisement, is sufficient to enable the restoration of peace within a community.

In the third story the Torah does not inform us exactly how Moshe rescued the daughters of Yitro. Did he coerce or persuade the other shepherds to allow the women to water their flock? Perhaps all he did was appear on the scene on their side. Sometimes the greatest *chesed* and the greatest justice can be achieved simply through supportive presence.

I don't deceive myself into thinking I made a significant contribution to the civil rights struggle. But I take pride in havin, like Moshe, lent my Jewish supportive presence to the continuous battle for human dignity in the world.

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 struck a blow against the black-Jewish coalition in America. By the early 1970's that rich collaborative relationship had disintegrated to the detriment of blacks, of Jews, of American society and of the battle for human dignity in the world.

The life and teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. are truly worth remembering, and a day in his honor is worth commemorating in our schools, in our shuls and in our homes.

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