

# Bringing Dr. King into the Beit Midrash

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Oddly, or perhaps not, for a product of the Orthodox yeshiva world, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., profoundly shaped my religious life. His life story, with all its achievements, failures, complexities and wonders, is, as are the lives of all spiritual giants, its own text and source of teaching. Let's look at three particular themes that speak to me in his thought: nonviolent struggle, the meaning of pluralism, and living Scripture.

In a 1956 sermon, Dr. King said: "In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as yourself."

Nonviolence is not pacifism, but a form of struggle, one, which asserts a human bond between the two parties to a conflict, including the oppressor. In nonviolent struggle, one individual made in the Divine Image, holds a mirror up to another, his oppressor, and forces him to acknowledge his own acts of injustice, the self-destruction of his own Divine Image, the ways in which by oppressing others he destroys himself.

This sense of witness is crucial to the Jewish concept of martyrdom, the sanctifying witness of God's presence, even to one's oppressors. Thus the struggle of sanctifying the name of God begins with a struggle with oneself, to realize one's own Divine Image, a challenge, we might add, greatly sharpened by Jewish statehood.

At the same time, where the oppressor refuses to recognize the other's basic humanity, nonviolence is a recipe for suicide – as Martin Buber pointed out on his response to Gandhi's suggestion that Jews undertake passive resistance to Nazism. When the oppressed refuses to see the oppressor's humanity all that is left is force. History will judge the Palestinians to have made a tragic error in never even trying the path of nonviolent resistance in their struggle with, of all people, Jews.

Dr. King's attempt to cross multiple lines of race, culture, religion, black and white, rich and poor, Jew and Christian, East and West, did not entail any surrender of the idea of universal moral standards. To the contrary, it was precisely his faith in a divine morality that enabled him, compelled him, to reach across those boundaries.

Dr. King decried "midnight within the moral order...colors lose their distinctiveness and become a sullen shade of grey...right and wrong are relative to likes and dislikes..." Yet, he said, "faith in the dawn arises from the faith that God is good and just. When one believes this, he knows that the contradictions of life are neither final nor ultimate." In his Nobel Prize lecture he called for "an all-embracing, an unconditional love for all men...of that force which all of the great religions have seen as a supreme unifying principle of life."

In his Christian idiom he spoke of love; a Jewish voice might speak more of the universal justice that, as Hillel taught the gentile who asked for the epitome of Torah, is the practical meaning of "Love thy Neighbor." Either way, we have here a pluralism that asserts strong moral claims, including respect of others, grounded in a powerful belief in God. We need not be scared of asserting that some things are indeed true, if that truth is grounded in humility and charity, which are the only ways we can stand in the presence of God.

The Rabbis of the Talmud read themselves and their lives into the Bible by reading one Biblical text in light of all the others, exploring connections between past, present and future that weave all of scripture into a whole. By contrast, Rev. King stepped into the Bible by reading it in the immediate light of one's own experience. That very experience, above all of Exodus redemption, was the template for the very real redemptions to come.

King says that the very concrete struggle between Egyptians and Israelites is the revelation of the struggle between good and evil throughout human history and of good's ultimate triumph, now, as then. By his reading, "And Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore." (Exodus 14:30) means that "As we look back we see... there is a Red Sea in history that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory, and that same Red Sea closes in to bring doom and destruction to the forces of evil."

He opened himself to the Biblical text with a breathtaking immediacy and moral passion. Thus in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech: "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.'" (Amos 5:24). In his astounding "I've Been to the Mountaintop" sermon, delivered the night before his murder, Moshe stands alongside every man of faith who knows that – "from a distance you will see the Land, and there you will not go" (Deut. 32:52) – and knows he must bring his people there nonetheless.

Withal, Dr. King wasn't a rabbi. He would have been the first to acknowledge that Judaism has its own Torah, its own particular forms of knowledge and action, and that a vague universal goodwill is no substitute for the stubborn articulation of a tradition's own selfhood (indeed he was himself the product of a rich tradition of African-American spirituality and preaching). Yet the addition of his voice to the blessed cacophony of the Beit Midrash, the House of Study, can perhaps bring us one step closer to the freedom which, we read in Tractate Pirkei Avot, (6:2) is the gift to those who preoccupy themselves with Torah.

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