

Martin Luther King Day
Summit Community Program

1/19/09

Rabbi Amy Joy Small

At times in human history, humanity has hid its face from God. In the absence of divine light, we have wrought darkness upon each other. We have oppressed our very brothers and sisters. In their cry to God, the oppressed have brought back to God and have been the doorway to our sacred calling.

It takes divinely inspired leadership to lead us back to the paths of compassion and justice. We are grateful to God for giving us great leaders who inspire and instruct us, whose courage brings us back to our human capacity for Godliness. It is out of this inspiration that we change our world. It is from these prophetic leaders that we are guided to hear our call, discern our purpose and renew our vision.

In the sacred text of our Abrahamic traditions we learn of the greatest such prophet, Moses. How appropriate it is then, that in synagogues all around the world this very week -- the weekly Torah reading cycle landed on the opening chapter of the book of Exodus. We read the sacred words of the bible's moving story of the call of Moses to lead the Hebrew slaves from slavery to freedom.

Few heroic leaders have had the courage, wisdom and impact of the Moshe Rabbeinu, known in Jewish tradition as Moses our Teacher.

But Moses has stood as a model for hundreds of generations and his teaching has inspired countless oppressed people to have faith and to work for freedom and justice.

Exodus3: 9. And therefore, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me; and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. 10. Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. 11. And Moses said to God, who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the people of Israel out of Egypt? 12. And he said, certainly I will be with you; and this shall be a sign to you, that I have sent you; when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.

At dark times we need great leaders like Moses, and God blessed us with just such a hero in our generation when the blight of racial inequality and injustice gripped our nation. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King stood in the footsteps of the beloved prophet Moses, speaking truth to power and courageously rallying a generation to stand up and be activists for justice. The force of his vision and the quality of his leadership brought Americans together to join hands in the work of racial equality and social justice.

A brilliance of Dr. King's message was his emphasis on unity. In his final speech in Memphis, he said:

It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept

the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.

Dr. King united us in our work for racial equality and justice. We are the inheritors of the courage, drive, passion, wisdom and efforts of the generation who heard Dr. King's message. But like Moses, he could not live on forever. Though we grieve for his life cut short by hatred, today we rejoice in the accomplishments of his short life. Like Moses, Dr. King paved the way for us to enter the Promised Land – together, now we must carry forth his work. In his Memphis address on the eve of his assassination, Dr. King invoked the image of Moses ascending the mountain:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. 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!

Since that time we have been charged with carrying on the mission that he so skillfully outlined for us. We are the generation to venture forth from the wilderness. And we are making progress.

Here in Summit we have come to embrace the diversity of our community with love. We have worked hard to create a united community of faith that mutually responds to God's call to repair our world, starting here in our small corner of humanity. We understand that this is our sacred purpose.

Our diverse interfaith community is united in working for social and economic justice among our people. Our work in advocating for affordable housing for all people is an example of this mission. We share friendship, prayer, and activism in the cause of a united, purposeful community of God-seekers. Today we celebrate being a multi-faith, multi-ethnic community.

We have much more to do, but we will not rest until our work is complete. We need to expand our circle of those involved in this work so that all will be freed from the yoke of oppression that still casts shadows on our nation's history and its current reality. As Dr. King so beautifully intoned in Washington 4 decades ago,

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

How totally amazing, how awe-some, how holy is this moment, as we celebrate today both the life and work of Dr. King while also celebrating the inauguration of our first African-American president. This day is proof that we can do it – working together for a just world, we can achieve what God requires of us! Like the call of Moses, the life of Dr. King, President Obama’s election gives us hope and renews our drive. Let us continue to work together as a unified community to bring all of God’s light back into our world. As the prophet Amos taught,

"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Now, this week as I listened to the reading of the call of Moses in synagogue, I could not help but hear in my mind the words of the old spiritual “Go Down Moses.” We sing it on Passover, and it is part of our shared tradition. Please allow me to lead us in singing a few verses:

Go down Moses
When Israel was in Egypt’s land,
Let my people go,
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.

Chorus

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt’s land.
Tell ol' Pharoah,
Let my people go.

Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go,
If not, I'll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go.

Chorus

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land.
Tell ol' Pharoah,
Let my people go.

As Israel stood by the waterside,
Let my people go,
At God's command it did divide,
Let my people go.

Chorus

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land.
Tell ol' Pharoah,
Let my people go.

Pharaoh said he'd go across,
Let my people go,
But pharaoh and his host were lost,
Let my people go.

Chorus

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land.
Tell ol' Pharoah,
Let my **people go**.