

LESSONS FROM THE KING

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MARTIN LUTHER KING CELEBRATION

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Shabbat shalom. Good evening. It is an honor to speak at this special event. I want to thank Rabbi Moch for the invitation. I also want to commend the students who have been recognized and are being honored tonight. I believe that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would be proud of your recognition, accomplishments, words, and this celebration. I am proud of you as well and would love to be your President.

If there is a person who lived during my lifetime, that has had both a personal and societal impact on my life, it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I grew up in Savannah, Georgia, which is four hours away from Atlanta where Dr. King was born and eventually served as the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. It was from this small church in Atlanta that he became a beacon of hope for a nation trapped by segregation, discrimination and hatred.

Though I was a very young boy when the Montgomery boycott occurred, it reverberated throughout the south and certainly generated similar activities in my hometown. Dr. King was not just a political figure to me; he was a source of pride and inspiration.

Growing up in the Deep South, under a system of segregation, the evils that Dr. King was fighting against, and the suffering he encountered were not abstract ideas for me. Growing up, I faced and encountered the same signs, acts of discrimination and psychological messages of inferiority. So I have a deep reverence and appreciation for the man we honor tonight. His sacrifice and that of so many others changed the conditions of my life. He broke down doors that I eventually walked through; he carved out space within the heart of America that I would one day occupy.

There is much that can be said about Dr. King, and so many books have been written, speeches given and movies made that it would be hard to add anything new to what already exists. Yet I believe that celebrations of this sort are not intended for us to just reflect on the person and the past, but to glean from their lives lessons which can help us to address problems we confront today. Dr. King did not want to be memorialized; he wanted to be an inspiration for change and transformation. His life provided us with more than facts and dates, but also lessons for us to shape our lives and build a "beloved community." Therefore, I want to speak to you tonight from the theme, "Lessons from a King." I hope these lessons will not only serve as wisdom for the students we honor tonight, but as sobering reminders to all of us about how we should strive to live.

1. The first and most important lesson of Dr. King's life is that *service and sacrifice are the greatest legacies that we can leave.*

Dr. King devoted his life to the service of others. He was a well educated person with numerous degrees and opportunities to live a comfortable life and be consumed with only his needs and that of his family. Yet he chose to take on the burdens of a nation. He chose to put the dignity, self esteem and freedom of a people above his own comfort. He sacrificed time, family and career to save a nation from itself.

The greatest sacrifice by Dr. King was his life. Many could have predicted that he would be assassinated because he challenged existing powers and stared hatred in the face many days. After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, it is reported that Dr. King said to his wife, "I fear that this is how I will die." So he knew the danger, but also deeply believed that he was being called to make a difference in the world. He once stated, "If a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live."

-- Speech in Detroit, Michigan; June 23, 1963

You and I are not being asked to sacrifice our lives for a cause, but we each are being asked to sacrifice some of the things we treasure for the good of others. Each of you has a calling to fulfill and this recognition that you are receiving tonight should inspire you to discover and embrace that calling.

There is a Dr. King inside all of us. We can ignore the yearning to serve, we can cover it up with material obsessions, but the answers to the problems that plague these islands, this nation and this world will only be corrected when each of us gives more in the service of others and in the service of high ideals. Dr. King captured this point eloquently when he stated that "the ultimate measure of a (person) is not where he/she stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he/she stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige and even his life for the welfare of others." -- *Strength in Love* (1963)

So the question that confronts us each day is "What will we risk for the welfare of others who are in our lives and even for those we do not know?"

2. The second lesson of Dr. King's life that I believe we should remember is that he understood that *nonviolence is more than a strategy, but rather, it is a way of life.*

Dr. King did not just embrace nonviolence protest, sit-ins and marches because he thought they were the most effective strategies against white supremacy in the south and even throughout the nation. He embraced them because he valued life more than victory. He believed in the preciousness of life, even the life of those who hated him. He

believed that the command to “Love thy neighbor as thyself” was more than a spiritual slogan, but a mandate for life. The recent shooting in Arizona should serve as a stark reminder of how we consistently ignore and abandon this principle of nonviolence. People who woke up on Saturday with plans and dreams had them shattered because of the violence that existed inside the mind and soul of one man. The deaths of our youth and others in this community should inspire us to internalize and embrace Dr. King’s message of non violence. He warned us that “We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.” -- Speech in St. Louis, Missouri; March 22, 1964

So many people, especially, young men, are perishing on our streets, for we have not been able to make peace, nonviolence and love realities in our homes, schools, community and hearts.

Dr. King realized that violence is not just caused by the weapons people carry around with them. Our words and attitudes often create a spirit of violence that injures people emotionally. There are so many individuals who suffer from the trauma of words uttered by others. As adults we model bad behavior for our children when they see us handling conflicts by demonizing those who disagree with us. Our children learn to be bullies because they see adults bullying each other in political debates, relationships and in public discourse.

Dr. King used words to inspire, not to humiliate or crush people’s spirit. He knew that the spirit and value of love had to come from his heart, and had to be visible in his action in order to transform this nation. We face the same challenge today.

3. The third lessons I want to share is directly related to this last statement. Despite his commitment to the value of love, he also understood that *love and justice are inextricably linked to one another.*

He did not try to cover up the reality of inequality, suffering and poverty with a blanket of love that ignored the suffering of people. His love for people and life propelled him to be a justice crusader.

Each of us also has an obligation to challenge the wrongs that we see all around us. We have a responsibility to address, and hopefully correct, injustice in our midst by using the power of love. Dr. King once stated that “Standing beside love is always justice.” Though the signs of segregation have disappeared from the landscape of America, and the Vietnam War is long over, there are still injustices in America and the world. I believe that rampant homelessness is an injustice in one of the richest countries in the world. When life expectancy and infant mortality rates can still be measured along racial lines, then justice is still a fleeting ideal. When women still earn less than men and are more often the victims of sexual and domestic abuse, then we still need justice crusaders like Dr. King.

4. The next lesson I share with you is that *religion and spirituality play a role in our lives and serve as engines for social change.*

If one were to ask Dr. King from whence came his strength, he would clearly say that it came from an intimate and close relationship with God. As much as we would like to intellectualize about this great man and make him fit into our secular images of greatness, at his core, Dr. King was a minister. He was inspired and nurtured in the church. He used religious principles, precepts and scriptures to create a powerful vision for social change, and to inspire one of the most impressive movements in history. People responded to his message because they had similar spiritual yearnings. Many religious leaders, of various religious backgrounds and denominations responded to his call and joined the freedom campaign.

The lesson for us today is that we must view our religious beliefs and spiritual yearnings, as aids in our quest for social change and personal development. We are whole people who need to search for sacred rivers and allow them to feed our souls. Dr. King was sensitive to the fact that in a modern, technological society it is easy for our spiritual values to take a back seat. He once commented on this fact and stated, "The means by which we live have outdistanced the ends for which we live. Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men." -- *Strength in Love* (1963), Ch. 7

The lesson again from Dr. King's life and words is that *if we are not careful, we too can become misguided in our quest for success.* If we abandon or minimize our spiritual values, then we may gain worldly wealth, but acquire impoverished souls.

On the other hand, his famous letter from the Birmingham jail in response to the criticism he received from religious leaders in Birmingham is a classic reminder of how organized religion can sometimes be used as a force to cover up injustice and support the status quo. Our challenge is to make sure we use our religious teachings and organizations as instruments to serve humanity and not as excuses for complacency. For, it is not just non-religious people who stand in the way of justice and love. Dr. King eloquently captured this paradox when he stated, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people." -- *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963

Let our religious institutions shine a light on suffering and lead the way to correct it. Let us use our spiritual values to guide us and reinforce us in our quest for justice and our mandate to serve others.

5. The last lesson I leave with you is *the power of leadership*.

If you chronicled the most famous and dynamic leaders of the 20th century, Dr. King would be on the list. He embodied so many of the traits and values that are needed for effective leadership. He was wise, courageous, humble, smart, and a true visionary. But more importantly, he embraced the values that he asked others to follow. Leadership by its nature is more about who we are and not just about what we do. It is about the values we possess and manifest and not just the titles we wear.

All of us are leaders and have the potential to be great leaders. But we must understand, just as Dr. King came to realize, that the leadership mantle will not be easy. It is lonely, challenging, and even regrettable at times. But, we lead not for self glory or praise, but because we want to respond to a greater calling and make a greater difference in the world.

So, perfect your leadership ability today, by seeing yourself as a leader and embracing the unlimited potential that exists within us all.

Dr. King never saw himself as the savior of black people in the south. He reluctantly assumed the leadership role in the Montgomery bus boycott. His humility made him feel as if others were better suited to be the leaders of this movement. Yet he responded to the call because the circumstances of history called his name.

To the students here today I want to let you know that the circumstances of our present and future are calling your name. Will you respond? Will you take a leap of faith and believe that you can provide something special to those in need, and become the next Dr. King? Most students can figure out the next step they must take in order to finish school and go on to college. But leaders are willing to go where there are not steps. We need you to create new pathways to success; and new avenues to truth so that together we can we can make the Virgin Islands and the world a true paradise.

In conclusion, I want like to thank Rabbi Moch and the members of this congregation for keeping alive the work and life of Dr. King. Dr. King had a vision of brotherhood that embraced all people. That vision was eloquently captured in his famous speech during the march on Washington. In describing the role that freedom would play in our lives and in this society he stated:

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every tenement 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 spiritual, "free at last, free at last. Thank god almighty, we are free at last."

-- I Have a Dream speech, August 28, 1963

The bells of freedom have rung, but they need our continuous attention. When they don't ring for some they imprison the rest of us. Our pathways to true brotherhood and sisterhood are dependent upon our ability in every generation to be strong advocates for justice and freedom.

May those of us gathered here today, not only commit ourselves to the principle of love, but to the mandate of justice through service. If we do that, then Dr. King would not have lived in vain, and our gathering tonight would have truly rung the bells of freedom.