

Shemot Drash 1/14/2023

Martin Luther King Weekend and Yahrtzeit of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
Rabbi Chai Levy Congregation Netivot Shalom

This past week, on Wednesday, 18 Tevet, it was the 50th yahrtzeit
Of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Most of you are familiar with Heschel and have read some of his many
powerful and important writings that have truly shaped Jewish thought.
He is one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the past century, and
Much of what we take for granted as our “big Jewish ideas” today
Originated with him.

He combined the mystical, Hasidic thought of his forebears
With the activism for social justice of the prophets
An expressed these with a poetic and prophet voice for the 20th century
That changed Judaism as we know it.
He wrote about “radical amazement,”
about the Divine as “the ineffable,”
the bible as a “midrash on revelation,”
the Sabbath as a “sanctuary in time,”
the Divine Pathos of the God of the Prophets, and so much more –
and the impact of these writings on all of us and on the evolution of Judaism
is truly beyond measure.

Heschel was a refugee from Nazi Europe.
Much of his family, his mother and siblings, were killed in the Shoah.
He was born in Warsaw, educated in Germany, and was rescued
6 weeks before the German invasion of Poland
by the President of Hebrew Union college,
who worked to get visas for him and other scholars to come to the United States.
Once here, he taught at HUC for a few years and then JTS,
teaching Jewish thought, ethics, and mysticism
And of course, writing and fighting for social justice and protesting the Vietnam
war.

Not only is this week Rabbi Heschel’s 50th yahrtzeit, but
This very day, is the 60th anniversary of the speech he delivered on Jan 14, 1963
At the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago.

This 4 day conference brought together religious leaders to discuss America's racial problems, and was hailed by Martin Luther King as "the most significant and historic [convention] ever held for attacking racial injustice" Dr. King gave one of the major speeches at the conference, which opened with a statement from President John F Kennedy, and was where Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel met and became friends. The conference was scheduled to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, and The organizers described the purpose of the conference as bringing "the joint moral force of the churches and synagogues to bear on the problem of racial segregation." At the close of the conference, attendees adopted "An Appeal to the Conscience of the American People," which concluded: "We call upon all the American people to work, to pray and to act courageously in the cause of human equality and dignity while there is still time, to eliminate racism permanently and decisively, to seize the historic opportunity the Lord has given us for healing an ancient rupture in the human family, to do this for the glory of God."

So, here we are 60 years after this historic conference. It's Martin Luther King Day Weekend, and Heschel's 50th yarhzeit. And fittingly, our parasha is Shemot. The opening of Exodus and the master narrative of our people. Not surprisingly, Rabbi Heschel grounded his speech on Jan 14, 1963 At the National Conference on Religion and Race In the very words of today's Torah portion.

As we honor the life and work of Dr. King and remember the blessing of the life of Rabbi Heschel, I want to share some excerpts from Rabbi Heschel's talk that day, that speech that was so grounded in our Torah. He began like this:

"At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go." (Ex 5:1-2) The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed."

Sixty years later, we may take for granted the biblical roots of the fight for civil rights and racial equality. We may think that the widely shared image of Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel marching arm in arm with other activists like John Lewis has become a cliché already, but we have to remember how radical and path-forming this moment was.

This moment of connecting the sacred teachings of our Torah
And the central story of our Jewish people to the fight for racial justice in the 1960's was momentous.

And we can look at the racism that still plagues our society today and see that Heschel's drash on our parasha has not become dated in these last 60 years. We can look at the so-called pious among our own people - see that it's not a given to read the story of the exodus and draw from it a message of social justice, freedom, and equality.

Just look at some of the leaders in the new Israeli government who are working against justice, freedom and equality - for Palestinians, for LGBTQ people – and See how pivotal and powerful was Heschel's reading of Torah.

Heschel continued in his speech to challenge the very notion of race,
Drawing upon the Torah's notion of all humanity being created
B'tzelem Elohim, in the Divine image.

He even challenged the name of the conference, saying:

Religion and race. How can the two be uttered together? To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child. To act in the spirit of race is to sunder, to slash, to dismember the flesh of living humanity. ... Perhaps this Conference should have been called "Religion or Race."

Race prejudice... is... a treacherous denial of the existence of God.... The Bible does not say, God created the plant or the animal; it says, God created different kinds of plants, different kinds of animals (Genesis 1: 11 12, 21-25). In striking contrast, it does not say, God created different kinds of man, men of different colors and races; it proclaims, God created one single man. From one single man all men are descended....The redeeming quality of man lies in his ability to sense his kinship with all men. Yet there is a deadly poison that inflames the eye, making us see [the generality of] race but not the uniqueness of the human face....

Prayer and prejudice cannot dwell in the same heart. Worship without compassion is worse than self deception; it is an abomination.

Heschel went on in his speech to draw direct connections between other big Jewish ideas with the work of racial and social justice.

He spoke of how humiliating someone publicly is akin to bloodshed in Judaism
And how societal, systemic racism makes us all guilty of that.

He drew upon the Hebrew prophets, like Isaiah,
and called upon us to not remain indifferent to injustice and discrimination,
And he condemned those who argued that religion should stay out of social problems, calling the bifurcation of the secular and sacred
a tragedy and *"the segregation of God"*

and he spoke of teshuva, of repentance and the possibility of redemption and repair in society, saying "It is time for the white man to repent."

And that "a leap of action" is required of us.

And he concluded by coming back to our parasha, to Moshe and Pharaoh,
and to the core message of the exodus, saying

"It was good that Moses did not study theology under the teachers of the message of [there's really nothing we can do about the inequalities in our society]" "otherwise," Heschel said,

"I would still be in Egypt building pyramids."

Heschel read our Torah and laid out a choice before us, saying:

"We are all either Pharaohs or slaves of Pharaohs"

And *"daily we should take account and ask: What have I done today to alleviate the anguish, to mitigate the evil, to prevent humiliation?"*

Heschel's drasha on this parasha 60 years ago to the day

At the National Conference on Religion and Race

Still powerfully resonates today,

Especially on this weekend in which we honor the work and memory of
Rev Martin Luther King.

Let us honor the prophetic wisdom of these great visionary leaders.

Dr King and Rabbi Heschel

By reading our Torah and the story of the Exodus

With their perush always in mind, like the Rashi to the Exodus narrative.

The God that we meet in this parasha
Who hears the cries of the enslaved Israelites and
who Moshe meets at the at the burning bush
is the power of transformation, possibility.
The God that reveals to Moshe the name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*"
is the God of becoming, transforming,
Is the Divine saying: what IS is not what Ought to be.
God says to Moshe: tell the Israelites that Ehyeh sent you.
Ehyeh is the future of God's 4 letter name, YHVH,
which is the past, present, and future of the verb "to be"
meaning: this God moves us toward a redemptive future,
What IS is not what should be, what could be.
There is something better, a promised land on the other side of the sea,
And, this God who shows up in our parasha says,
I'm going to help you cross over to there.

This is the God that Heschel spoke of when he first met Dr. King
60 years ago today.
And I think the God whose name is "Ehyeh, I will be"
is what Dr. King meant when he accepted the Nobel peace prize and said:
"I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him
morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts
him."

This God of possibility, transformation, who brings us to greater freedom, equality
and redemption first emerges in our parasha, in our exodus story.
It's the heart of our Torah
that inspired our great leaders for social justice and equality,
Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King,
and may we continue to hear and be moved to live by this vision.