

Dr. King, Rabbi Heschel, and the “job of the minister”

Cantor Shoshana Brown

Martin Luther King Jr. Day comes this year just four days prior to the presidential inauguration. Simultaneously, the Jewish world will also mark the 44th anniversary of the death of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, King’s colleague and fellow fighter-for-justice – whose memorial-date falls in the Jewish calendar on the 18th of Tevet, coinciding this year with Jan. 16th.

One wonders what these comrades in arms would think if they could see us today. Did King give his life in vain? Certainly not! On Jan. 20th we will say goodbye to our nation’s first African-American president; I doubt King imagined that such a thing could have happened within what would have been his lifetime - if only he had lived to see it!

Nonetheless, progress comes in fits and starts. Two years ago we witnessed pitched battles over whether South Carolina would continue to fly the Confederate flag over its capitol, then the awful massacre by Dylann Roof of nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. In 2013 the Black Lives Matter movement was sparked by the “vigilante”-killing of the young Trayvon Martin. Far too many more African-Americans have lost their lives since then as a result of overly-aggressive police tactics. Add to this a significant rise in hate crimes in both 2015 and 2016: in the first ten days following the Nov. 8th presidential election, the Southern Poverty Law Center counted 867 cases of racist, anti-Muslim or anti-Semitic incidents across the country. Additionally, we have beheld an alarming rise in harassment and death threats against journalists this past year, especially for Jewish and/or women journalists.

During 2016 Chicago suffered an appalling amount of violence, most of it with guns. In Feb. 2016, the American Journal of Medicine published a study that found that Americans are 10 times more likely to be killed by guns than residents of other developed nations. Poll after poll has shown that a huge majority of Americans favor greater gun control – but because the NRA, one of the most powerful special interest lobby groups in the US, spends millions of dollars each year to influence gun policy, and because too many legislators let themselves be “bought” by this lobby, the deaths continue.

What can any of us do about such things? Why did King and Heschel defy, at great risk, the status quo of their era, bearing witness to the racism, injustice, corruption and indifference of American society? On January 14, 1963, Heschel delivered a talk entitled “Religion and Race,” in which he related the condemnation of the clergy who had joined King in the struggle for civil rights by a white preacher who declared “The job of the minister is to lead the souls of men to God, not to bring about confusion by getting tangled up in transitory social problems!”

Heschel, who had deeply imbibed the spirit of the Hebrew prophets, disagreed. In his 1964 essay “The White Man on Trial,” Heschel proclaimed:

"The teaching of Judaism is the theology of the common deed. God is concerned with everydayness, with the trivialities of life. . . . The prophet's field of concern is not the mysteries of heaven, the glories of

eternity, but the blights of society, the affairs of the market place. . . . [The prophet] addresses himself to those who trample upon the needy, who increase the price of grain, use dishonest scales, and sell the refuse of corn.”

Back at New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary, Heschel faced the disapproval of many of his colleagues, who were content to study Judaism’s sacred tomes without translating their teachings into living deeds. In his “Religion and Race” we can hear how this pained Heschel. Though his words were penned over 50 years ago, they sound almost as if they were uttered yesterday:

“That equality is a good thing, a fine goal, may be generally accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of inequality...The Negro movement is an outcry of pain in which a sickness of our total society comes to expression: supersonic planes and sub-standard housing; esoteric science and vulgar ethics; an elite of highly specialized experts, and a mass of unprepared, unskilled laborers. The apex of the pyramid ascends most rapidly, while the base expands with equal rapidity. It is the Negro movement that sounds the alarm at a time when the rest of society seems content and unprepared to face a social emergency. It is the problem of jobs for the unemployed, dignity for those who are on relief, employment for the unskilled, the threat of automation, the curse of poverty, the blighted slums in our cities...Religion becomes a mockery if we remain callous to the irony of sending satellites to the sky and failing to find employment for our fellow citizens, of a highly publicized World's Fair and insufficient funds for the extermination of vermin in the slums...Is religion to be a mockery?”

As we approach Martin Luther King Day, I ask myself: what is the “job of the minister” today? I believe it is to encourage our communities to embrace the prophetic exhortation to “seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly” with both God and our fellow human beings. Neither Heschel nor King, both great men, could finish the task within their lifetimes. It is up to us to receive the torch from their hands, to keep the flame alive, and to pass it on, brightly lit, to the next generation.

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