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I Have a Dream meets Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity
(Leviticus 19:1-18; Amos 5:14-24)

At Monday's historic second inauguration of President Obama, I had a once in a lifetime opportunity, standing together with fellow citizens to witness a profound ritual of our democracy. As we waited in security lines to get to our section, and occupied ourselves in the hours until the swearing-in ceremony was to begin, the air was crisp but not bitter cold. The atmosphere was festive and friendly. As our bodies pressed up close to one another, the excitement was palpable. From our patch of grass, I expected that it would be difficult to make out much at the podium, about a football field away. What I hadn't anticipated was that as someone who barely cracks five feet in my tallest heels, even the Jumbotron would be eclipsed. All I could see were shoulders and heads above me. So until some thoughtful people generously and thankfully helped me move toward the front of our section, I could not see, but only hear.

Yet, all good ritual reverberates. The first words uttered by Senator Chuck Schumer introducing the proceedings had a familiar resonance—I heard the Jewish Brooklyn accent of my childhood. Then, invoking blessings upon our President, our citizens and our country, Myrlie Evers-Williams' deep, comforting cadence rang out the hymn's refrain, "there's something within me that holds the reins". Her presence, the first woman, the first layperson ever to offer an invocation at such an august occasion, underscored that this second inauguration of our first black president fell on Martin Luther King Day, a day as much marking the movement for civil rights as marking the man. Fifty years ago, Myrlie Evers became a widow and single mother of three when her activist husband Medger was killed. Fifty years ago, marchers protesting for jobs and freedom filled the National Mall as we were doing, and heard the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preach, "I have a dream." Fifty years later, President Barack Hussein Obama placed his hand on two bibles—one belonging to President Abraham Lincoln, which he swore on in his first inauguration and this time, a second one, belonging to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. symbolically affirming a promise to carry forth King's dream.

Fifty years ago last week, another, less heralded, but nonetheless consequential moment occurred. In Chicago, the first Conference on Religion and Race, one with its own historical echoes took place. It was convened to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The conference began with a statement from President John F. Kennedy, pledging to do, "what is possible to protect and preserve our cherished democratic traditions" which accord full rights to every American regardless of his race, religion, color or country of national origin. The Rev. Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. called the conference, “the most significant and historic [convention] ever held for attacking racial injustice. Dr. King gave one of the major speeches of the four-day event, entitled, “A Challenge to Justice and Love”. In evoking equality and the American Dream, Dr. King, as did our president on Monday, intoned the words of the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.” Dr. King was speaking to fellow clergy, ministers, priests and rabbis, affirming and buoying them even as he articulated the contempt and consequences they would incur for following their conscience. He enumerated the places—behind jail bars, before howling and jeering mobs, where those who stood up for justice joined hands to sing “We Shall Overcome”. He reminded those faithful clergy that one of the stanzas promises, “The Lord shall see us through.”

At that same conference was another keynote speaker, a man with a long white beard who looked like a prophet. Abraham Joshua Heschel was a rabbi, a theologian, a mystic and a social activist. His foreign accent betrayed his history—In 1940, Rabbi Heschel was one of eight scholars brought out of Nazi Germany by the Hebrew Union College, rescued before his mother and sisters were murdered in the Holocaust. He was born in Warsaw, into a Hasidic family with seven generations of distinguished rabbis, whom he proudly referred to as spiritual nobility. In addition to rabbinic ordination, he earned a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Berlin, researching and writing on the biblical prophets. In Cincinnati at the Hebrew Union College and later in New York at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he was primarily a scholar, writer and teacher. But, this Eastern European transplant to America was no stranger to adversity, to inhumanity, to injustice. And as he revised his dissertation for publication in the early sixties, he became an activist—the prophetic voices he knew so well decrying the injustice around him and, joining his own, emerged like a clarion call from his mouth. At the Conference on Religion and Race, Rabbi Heschel began his talk claiming,

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....”

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. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.

Heschel maintained that racism is the gravest threat not only to humanity, but also to spirituality and divinity. “Perhaps this conference should have been called ‘Religion *or* Race.’ You cannot worship God and at the same time look at man as if he were a horse...To think of man in terms of white, black, or yellow is more than an error. It is an *eye disease, a cancer of the soul.*”

Harkening back to his opening assertion, in his accented English, Heschel thundered,

We are all Pharaohs or slaves of Pharaohs. It is sad to be a slave of Pharaoh. It is horrible to be a Pharaoh.

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

Let there be a grain of prophet in every man!

Then, as if peering into the future, seeing the hopes invested in our president by those of us gathered Monday at our national shrines or watching at home from sea to sea, Heschel reminded his clergy audience, “Let us not forget the story of the sons of Jacob. Joseph, the dreamer of dreams, was sold into slavery by his own brothers. But at the end it was Joseph who rose to be the savior of those who had sold him into captivity.”

As Dr. King would do in his own speech before this same conference, Rabbi Heschel quoted Amos, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” And then he concluded with his own commentary on Amos:

A mighty stream, expressive of the vehemence of a never-ending, surging, fighting movement—as if obstacles had to be washed away for justice to be done. No rock is so hard that water cannot pierce it...Justice is not a mere norm, but a fighting challenge, a restless drive.

Righteousness...is God’s power in the world, a torrent, an impetuous drive, full of grandeur and majesty. The surge is choked, the sweep is blocked. Yet the mighty stream will break all dikes.

...In the eyes of the prophets, justice is more than an idea or a norm: justice is charged with the omnipotence of God. What ought to be, shall be.

At the Conference on Religion and Race, fifty years ago last week, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. met one another for the first time. They recognized and inspired each other. Deep roots of religious wisdom shaped each of them. Each could claim spiritual royalty; each was descended from generations of religious leaders. Each met the degradation and hatred hurled at them upright, with profound dignity. Each had studied the prophets and felt commanded to bring those prophetic promises to life. For Heschel, the prophets reminded him what God wanted from human partners, what God wanted from him. For King, the prophets assured him that the civil rights struggle was presaged by the victory at the Red Sea. As he was fond of saying, “a Red Sea passage in history ultimately brings the forces of goodness to victory. Heschel said, “A prophet is a person who holds God and

men in one thought at one time, at all times.” King and Heschel each aspired to be worthy of the mantle of prophecy. So once they met, they joined forces, and lived out their convictions as allies, as friends, stirring and strengthening one another.

Just after Medger Evers was assassinated in June, 1963, President Kennedy invited religious leaders to the White House to discuss civil rights. Heschel telegraphed back, “I look forward to privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow. Likelihood exists that Negro problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church synagogues have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month’s salary toward fund for Negro housing and education. I propose that you Mr. President declare state of moral emergency. A Marshall plan for aid to Negroes is becoming a necessity. The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.”

Moral grandeur and spiritual audacity required concerted action. When word arrived that civil rights activists had been billy-clubbed, tear-gassed and whipped with cattle prods at the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, in what came to be known as “Bloody Sunday”, Rabbi Heschel led a delegation of protesters nearly a thousand strong to FBI headquarters in New York City. He received a telegram from Dr. King just before Shabbat asking that he join the marchers in Selma. Just after Shabbat ended, after sundown Saturday night, Rabbi Heschel flew to Alabama. He marched with Dr. King in the front row, with garlands draped around their neck, a portrait of brotherhood immortalized in an iconic photograph. The experience continued to reverberate for Rabbi Heschel. He noted, “For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”

Prayer and prophecy joined hands and marched in tandem. Two religious traditions, two resolute leaders wove a dream of national promise, justice and dignity, entwining the warp of moral grandeur with the woof of spiritual audacity. Steeped in religious traditions, schooled in social justice, Rev. King and Rabbi Heschel truly knew one another as brothers. They marched arm in arm at Selma, prayed together in protest of the Vietnam War at Arlington National Cemetery and stood side by side in the pulpit of Riverside Church.

In late March, 1968, Dr. King attended a rabbinical convention to honor his friend’s 60th birthday. A room full of rabbis greeted him by clasping hands and singing, “We Shall Overcome” in Hebrew. Introducing him, Rabbi Heschel said, “Where in America do we hear the voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us.

His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred. His leadership of supreme importance to every one of us...Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision and a way. I call upon every Jew to harken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King.” Dr. King expressed his appreciation for hearing the civil right’s movement’s theme song in Hebrew and, in turn, for his friendship with Rabbi Heschel, who he described as a truly great prophet. “...here and there we find those who refuse to remain silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows, and they are forever seeking to make the great ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage relevant in this day and in this age. I feel that Rabbi Heschel is one of the persons who is relevant at all times, always standing with prophetic insights to guide us through these difficult days....To a great extent [he] inspired clergyman of all the religious faiths of our country. Many went out and decided to do something they had not done before. So I am happy to be with him, and I want to say Happy Birthday, and I hope I can be here to celebrate your one hundredth birthday.”

Sadly, celebrating Rabbi Heschel’s one hundredth birthday was not to be. Dr. King was assassinated just ten days later, on April 4th, and only ten days before he had planned to be at his friend’s Seder to celebrate Passover, the Festival of Freedom, the reenactment of that lodestar—the crossing of the Red Sea on the journey into the Promised Land. Instead of singing together at the Seder table, Mrs. King invited Rabbi Heschel to speak at Dr. King’s funeral. Rabbi Heschel died four years after his friend.

On Monday, on Martin Luther King’s day, as I watched President Obama place his hand on Dr. King’s Bible—the source of Dr. King’s and Rabbi Heschel’s wisdom and vision—I prayed that our president be fortified by their inspiration, courage and conviction. And, to those of us who were privileged to see this moment from near or from afar, with our own lips and legs and hands, I pray that we commit ourselves to join with our President to make of our nation one of moral grandeur and spiritual audacity, worthy of the prophets of our time. *Zecher tzaddim l’vracha*. May the memory of these righteous leaders be for us, a blessing.

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