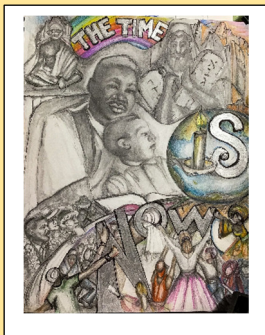


RABBI'S MESSAGE

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Moses and Martin



Artwork: "The Time is Now" by Loren Gordon, depicting Martin Luther King, Jr., Martin Luther King III, Moses, Ghandi, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and marchers for today and tomorrow.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to join the *Houston Jewish Alliance for Civil Rights* at the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day Parade. The Jewish group was small in comparison to some of the schools and other organizations, and we represented a diverse group of Jewish clergy, community leaders, adults and children from several different synagogues and organizations. In marching for human rights, we joined a longstanding Jewish tradition, as one participant wore a t-shirt that said, "Fighting Tyrants Since Pharaoh." I was reminded of the many similarities between Martin Luther King, Jr. and the biblical hero, Moses.

The similarities have just as much to do with their shortcomings as with their leadership. Both men have come to symbolize the ultimate in leadership, and neither would have anticipated this role. Both came from humble beginnings, and both took on their leadership roles reluctantly. Civil rights leaders knew they needed a charismatic young voice to inspire the African American community to stand up for their own rights. A protest march was planned to go right by Dr. King's church, and when he saw the passionate marchers, he felt drawn to the movement. Moses found a heavenly voice that spoke to him from a burning bush as he chased after a lost sheep. He insisted that he was not the one to lead the Hebrews from slavery and pointed to his speech difficulties as a reason for G-d to look elsewhere. G-d countered by telling Moses that he would not have to act alone, but that his brother Aaron would help with the speaking and G-d himself would provide support. Both men needed to learn that they could not achieve such lofty goals without help from others. Despite their humility, both spoke truth to power, Moses with his demands to Pharaoh and King to political leaders of the south. Moses and Martin both helped their people move forward toward real progress, but neither lived to see the "Promised Land." As Moses looked over the Jordan River, he knew he had led his people as far as possible and they would have to go on without him. King's premonition on the night before his death was very reminiscent of Moses: *"Well I don't know what will happen...but it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anyone, I would like to live a long life...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. I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land...Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the LORD."*

A Jewish alliance in a parade to honor Dr. King's legacy is in perfect keeping with Jewish tradition. Our march across the desert took forty years. But the march continues as long as oppression exists against any people because of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age or sexual identification. For some, the Jewish focus has been, "We have to look out for ourselves because nobody else will." I prefer to look at the teachings of Rabbi Hillel, who says, *"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"*

Dr. King was famously joined by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in Selma, Alabama. Rabbi Heschel was asked why a Jewish rabbi, born in Poland, educated in Germany and who teaches rabbis at a Jewish seminary would interrupt his busy life to march in Alabama for the rights of African American who were not even Jewish. Rabbi Heschel said, "I am praying with my feet."

The march continues, progressing toward a "Promised Land" that is free from all oppression. We can all do our part.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon