

## Moses and MLK: To Be A Prophet

In Exodus 7:26 we read:

<i>Bo el paro</i>	Go to Pharaoh
<i>v'amarta elav</i>	and say to him:
<i>ko amar Adonai,</i>	"Thus says God
<i>shlach et ami</i>	let my people go!"

Each year when the week arrives that we read the story of Moses confronting Pharaoh, of the plagues against Egypt and the release of the Israelites— it almost always occurs on our western calendar just before or just after the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial. And there are, of course, significant parallels between the Torah portion and the life of Rev. King.

As God tells Moses "Go to Pharaoh though I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officers", so King must have heard a similar voice and warning sending him into the midst of modern pharaohs and officers whose hearts were hardened against the cries of the oppressed. Moses' demand in Torah was echoed 3400 years later in the plea of Rev. King: "Let my people go!" But this comparison is not news to any of us. Connecting Moses to Martin has been done before, and by others far more eloquent than I. And each year on the Monday of the MLK Memorial in speeches and sermons across America, we'll likely hear that while Moses was the first, even the greatest in the long line of prophets, it is Martin who is the most recent. I have no argument with that statement, Rev. King exemplified the qualities properly associated with prophecy.

Some time ago I found myself in conversation with a local clergy colleague about the nature and the reality of prophecy. As we began to talk it became apparent that we were coming to this discussion from very different places, with very different interpretations of what it meant to be a "prophet". My colleague understood prophecy to mean the ability to foretell the future. A prophet, he said, was one who could predict future events with a God-given foreknowledge. The prophets of Hebrew Scripture, he reminded me, indeed told the future. What they wrote was what surely had come to be and would come to be! I gently told him that neither I, nor history, nor the Hebrew language were in agreement with him!

The prophets of Scripture did not have super-human, God-granted abilities to predict the future. Much of what the Biblical prophets "predicted", in fact, was wrong. It didn't happen. The great prophetic figures of Scripture spoke of what 'ought' to be, of what each understood God wants us to be and wants from us, along with the consequences of following or not following God's commands. When we define a prophet as one who foretells the future we do so at the expense of, and in opposition to, Hebrew Scripture and the Hebrew language.

The word *navi* (translated into English as 'prophet') is probably derived from the Akkadian word *nabu*, meaning "to call". The Hebrew is a passive derivative meaning one who is "called upon to call out". A *navi* is not a fortune-teller, he is an authorized spokesperson. And it is a mistake to assume that the function of such a person is to tell the future. Actually, prophets were seers—a "see-er", one who was able to see, understand and appreciate how the reality of the present should most likely affect the unfolding of events in the future. That insight is not a magical, mystical foretelling of things to come, but a penetrating understanding of things that are. The extent to which a prophet is able to "see" into the future is a measure of his skill to clearly appreciate the potential of the present! The parent who tells her child, if you don't study, you won't pass your math exam, or the physician who warns his patient if you don't lose weight you'll have health problems—are not predicting the future, they just understand and appreciate the realities of the present!

A prophet, a *navi*, is one who recognizes the beneficial potential in the lives we live and the communities we create. A *navi*, is, with one hand, intimately in touch with, and in control of, reality, and with the other hand reaches out to grasp a better future. Rev. King was indeed a *navi* as he firmly held the realities of his "present", while stretching forth to reach for the dream that America's tomorrow must become. For five decades now we have been guided by his out-stretched, pointing hand. He, like our prophets, spoke of what ought to be, of what God wants us to be.

In Jewish tradition we measure the merits of a prophet not by the accuracy of his assessment of the future, but by the truth he teaches us about the present! Torah tells us about an unlikely leader who found within himself a passion for justice and liberty. He went down to Egypt knowing that he would be challenged to have

his message heard. God forewarned Moses: *bo el paro* “Go to Pharaoh, though I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officers”. It is a story not so different from that of MLK.

There have been many, from Moses to Martin, who have been prophets, who saw that there ought to be, that there could be, something better in our future than what we accept in the present. What separates a *navi* from the rest of us is the insight and perseverance and most especially the courage to risk one’s hold on the present in order to reach out for the future. And the legacy of the *navi* is that he or she becomes an inspiration to those who continue the quest. A prophet inspires others to make real the promise of a better future.

There is something wonderfully ironic (and certainly serendipitous) that each year when come to the story of Moses going to Pharaoh, Moses this unlikely prophet who was to become the central figure in our historical drama of slavery to freedom—on our American calendar we are reminded of Martin who was a modern-day *navi* of his generation. Both of them inspire us to take hold of the potential before us in order that we may “repair” our world. Wherever there is slavery and oppression we are obligated to work for freedom. As Jews, we know this more than other peoples. As Jews we know all too well the importance of King’s message to all of America. May we continue to fight for righteousness and justice, for lovingkindness and mercy--as Jews and as Americans.

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