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Today's Torah

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Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
January 20, 2020 - 23 Tevet 5780



By: Rabbi Adam Greenwald
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I Would Choose Today

V'ani tefilati l'cha Adonai eit ratzon

"And I stand before you, O Lord, at this chosen moment."

- Psalms 69:14

Less than twenty-four hours before he would be killed by an assassin's bullet, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. took the podium at Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis and delivered a stirring speech to a packed audience made up mostly of striking sanitation workers. The address is primarily remembered today for his eerily prophetic final lines: "God has brought me to the mountaintop, and I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get there ... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

However, in re-reading the great man's words, I was struck by a lesser-known section at the very beginning of the speech. In it, King muses on the question of what he would say were God to offer him the extraordinary opportunity to live in any moment in history. He says that he would have liked to witness the

Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, to have spoken with philosophers in Greece, and to have seen the glory of Rome. He would have wished to briefly visit the Renaissance for the art, and to have met Lincoln and Roosevelt in our country's darkest hours. But he concludes: "Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy."

King lived in a time and place that, on its surface, was hardly the best of all possible worlds. He was confronted every day by the ugliness of racial hatred and a brutal level of violence that claimed many lives, including, eventually, his own. There were police dogs and firehoses and the Klan and the FBI and his own long days in a Birmingham prison cell. Every day was a struggle and the outcome of the fight for true equality was (and remains) perilously uncertain. If given the choice, why of all moments would King have chosen to accept the difficult destiny that fate had assigned him?

To this question, he said: "I know that it's only when it is dark enough that one can see the stars. And, I see God working in this period of history and human beings are, in some strange way, responding... [and] I am happy that God allowed me to live right now, so I can see what is unfolding."

My challenge, as we mark what would have been Dr. King's 91st birthday, is whether I can look at the world in which we live with the same degree of gratitude and moral resolve. We too live in hard times – an era of political division, of mass shootings, of profound distrust, of the looming, existential threat of climate change. Yet, King challenges us to recognize that even in such times, especially in such times, it is a privilege to be part of the struggle for goodness to prevail. To see the present darkness, as Valerie Kaur, the Sikh activist, documentarian, and faith leader teaches, as the darkness of the womb, not the darkness of the tomb. To recognize that this moment is our *eit ratzon*, our Divinely sanctioned moment, to muster all our spiritual, moral, individual, and communal resources to drive out the darkness and let shine the stars.

Rabbi Adam Greenwald, is the Executive Director of the Louis & Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism Program at American Jewish University. Before coming to AJU, he served as Revson Rabbinic Fellow at IKAR, a Los Angeles congregation often recognized as one of the nation's most creative and fastest-growing spiritual communities. Prior to ordination, he served two years as Rabbinic Intern at Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, CA and as Director of Education of the PANIM Institute's IMPACT: DC program. Rabbi Greenwald was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2011.



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