

A Study Session for Parashat Va'era
Weekend of Memorial for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

**Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, National Conference of
Rabbinical Assembly, March 25, 1968**

“Where does God dwell in America today? Is God at home with those who are complacent, indifferent to other people’s agony, devoid of mercy? Is God not rather with the poor and the contrite in the slums? Dark is the world for me, for all its cities and stars. If not for the few signs of God’s radiance who could stand such agony, such darkness. Where in America do we hear a 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... Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision and a way. I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King.”

Speech Delivered at Temple Emanuel, Worcester MA March 12, 1961

There is another way, there is another way with power and creativity, and this is the way of nonviolent resistance...Now, this method has many advantages. Number one, it gives one a method which makes it possible to seek moral ends through moral means...Somehow, in the long run of history, the end is pre-existent in the means. And here is a method where we can find means and ends consistent. And there is another thing about this method that makes it very powerful: It disarms the opponent. He doesn't know how to handle it. It somehow exposes his moral defenses and weakens his morale, and at the same time, appeals to his conscience.

And there is another thing of power about this method. It makes is possible for one to work to defeat and unjust system, and yet maintain an active understanding and love for the individuals who may be caught up in that unjust system. So that, somehow, it becomes possible to hate segregation and seek to defeat the system of segregation and yet love the segregationist, and understand that he, through history, through his culture, has been taught this way and he lives this way, because he doesn't know anything else.

And you seek to tear down that system, not to defeat or humiliate him, but to win his friendship and understanding. And so, when you boycott or when you resist that system through all of the power you can must up...you do it knowing the end is reconciliation. The end is the creation of the beloved community...

We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. And, do to us what you will, and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

And so: place us in jail, and we will go in with humble smiles on our faces. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country and make it appear that we are not fit morally, culturally, or otherwise for integration, and we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hours, and beat us and take us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead, and we will still love you.

But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal

to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory. And this, it seems to me, is the answer at this hour...

And so, this method...helps us to move on toward the great goal of justice. With the right attitudes, and with the right inner contentment and with a method which will not only help us achieve desegregation, but also integration. And maybe through following this way, the Negro and all who will be allied with him in the struggle will teach the world something that it so desperately needs to learn at this hour. For in a day when Sputniks and Explorers are dashing through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a war.

It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence...And this will be done, in the final analysis, when every individual of good will rises up and decides to take a stand, wherever he is. This will be done when enough people come to believe that integration is morally right, that the brotherhood of man is a necessity, and that they are willing to work assiduously for its realization.

Martin Luther King Jr. Speech, 12 March 1961. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Speech Delivered at Beth Emet Synagogue, Evanston IL January 13, 1958

...Also, we must continue to look to the liberals and the white mass of the leadership, this is very important, because segregation is not only a southern reality, it's just in the South in its glaring and conspicuous form, but it exists in the North and it is hidden in Southern forms. We know if democracy is to live, segregation must die in every area. We need a real liberalism all over this nation. What we find too often in the North is a sort of quasi liberalism, which is based on the velocity of looking sympathetically at all sides. It becomes so involved in seeing all sides that it doesn't get committed to either side. It is a liberalism that is so objectively analytical that it doesn't get subjectively committed. It is a liberalism that is neither hot nor cold but lukewarm. The need at this hour is for a positive, genuine, liberalism that people discover that there is no middle ground on the question of life, the time is always right to do right, right is right, and wrong is wrong and never between shall meet. Somehow, we need persons who will look sympathetically yes at all sides but come committed to the right side and stay on that side realizing that there are somethings that are right and that if it is right for people to have justice and freedom, we must get committed to it. Then, religious bodies all over this nation must continue to take a stand in the Christian church as a great responsibility. All too often in the church, we have had a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. This is tragic indeed, isn't it?...

You see, I conceive of a fourth period in race relations coming into being and its really the period of real integration. The third period, to be more accurate is a period of desegregation, desegregation is merely a break down of the legal barriers. It brings men together physically, but I conceive of a period when men come together spiritually. In Montgomery, Alabama, the buses are desegregated but we must not be content until the buses are integrated, until white people and colored people sit together not because the law says it, but because they want to and because they respect each other and because they feel that they are brothers...

...In most of our academic disciplines, there are certain words that eventually become clichés and stereotypes, they become a part of the technical nomenclature of that particular discipline. Every academic discipline has its technical words. Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word in modern psychology. There is a word, maladjusted. Maladjusted. This is a ringing cry of the new child psychology, maladjusted. Now, we must all seek to live the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. I want to say to you that there are certain things within our social system to which I'm proud to be

maladjusted. In which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of the Marjorie Blum. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of nuclear terrorism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence.

This evening, I call upon you to be maladjusted to all these things. For you see, it may be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. I call upon you to be maladjusted. There is a maladjusted as Amos, who in the midst of a tragic injustices of his day cry out in terms that echo across the generations, let judgement run down like waters, righteousness like a mighty stream. Maladjusted as Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free. Maladjusted as Jefferson who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery, cry out in terms lifted to cosmic proportions, "All men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who stood amid the intricate and fascinating military machinery of the Roman Empire who could say to men, "Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you." I say this evening that the world is in desperate need for maladjustment. It may be that this type of maladjustment will save us and bring us into the third and most constructive period of the history of race relations in our nation. If we follow such maladjustment, we will be able to move from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice. This would be the day figuratively speaking, when the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God, will shout for joy.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Remarks at Beth Emet. 13 January 1958. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

47th General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in Chicago IL November 20, 1963

Now there is a warning signal. This is not an easy course to follow. When one stands up against entrenched evil, he must be willing to face scorn, he must be willing to be persecuted for righteousness' sake, he must be willing to go down the path of suffering, he must be willing to even have a seven-year-old daughter stand before him with tears in her eyes saying, "Daddy, why do you have to go to jail so much?" This is the price if one is to follow this noble way of trying to make the brotherhood of man a reality and the kingdom of God a reality in our world.

But I say to you that I have a personal faith, not a faith born on flowery beds of ease, but a faith born out of the agony of living every day under the threat of death; a faith born out of the burden of daily scorn and excessive criticisms and false accusations; a faith that somehow, in spite of the darkness of this hour the daybreak of brotherhood will come into being. I have the faith that one day we will achieve right here in America the kind of society that we have talked about in such beautiful terms in the creed of our nation. We have a theme song in our movement, and I join in to sing it so often because I have faith, a faith that grows out of the words of the psalmist, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy cometh in the morning." A faith that comes out of the words of the old Negro spiritual, "I'm so glad that trouble don't last always."

And out of this faith we have developed a theme song for our movement: "We Shall Overcome." We shall overcome, deep in my heart I do believe, we shall overcome. Before the victory is won some of us will have to get thrown in jail some more, but we shall overcome. Before the victory is won, some will lose jobs. Before the victory is won, some of us will be called bad names—dangerous rabble rousers, agitators, communists, and reds, simply because we believe in the brotherhood of man. Before the victory is won, some more may have to face physical death like Medger Evers and the little children in Birmingham, Alabama, but if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children and their white brothers from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.

Yes, we shall overcome. So often we join hands to sing it behind crowded jail cells. So often we have gone before Bull Connor's police dogs to sing it. So often we've stood before the surging waters of the powerful fire hoses, and yet we could still sing, we shall overcome. Strange, isn't it? I remember my brother calling me that night in Birmingham when his home was bombed, and the Gaston Motel had been bombed and he was telling me that it had just happened. I had gone to Atlanta for the week-

end to preach at my church, and as he was telling me about the bombings, I could hear something in the background, some music. I said, "What is that?" and he said, "Listen a little more," and I could hear the words, we shall overcome, we shall overcome, deep in my heart I do believe, we shall overcome.

Strange, isn't it, that people can stand amid the smoldering ruins of their homes and their churches and sing still sing, we shall overcome? But there is a reason for being able to sing it. The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right; no lie can live forever. We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right; truth crushed to earth will rise again. We shall overcome because James Russel Lowell is right; truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. Yet that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown standeth God, within the shadow keeping watch above His own.

Yes, we shall overcome, and with this faith we will be able to adjourn the council of despair and bring new light into the chambers of pessimism. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. This will be a great day!

*Martin Luther King Jr. Address to the 47th General Assembly of the UAHC. SC-6307.
American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.*