

Daniel Kirzane
16 January 2026 / 28 Tevet 5786
Parashat Va-era

Joining Hands Together: A Martin Luther King, Jr. Shabbat Address

Chicago, Illinois, Edgewater Beach Hotel. January 14, 1963. The National Conference on Religion and Race opening keynote address is by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who begins:

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..." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice? ... I will not let Israel 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.¹

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't hear those words. In fact, he arrived in Chicago only two days later, on today's date: January 16th – the day after his 34th birthday. But when he did arrive, Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel met for the first time, and the bonds they forged in the hallways of that conference would blossom into moral affinity and personal friendship.

Both men knew not only the urgency of the fight for civil rights but also the responsibility of all people – and especially white people – to take a stand against injustice. Rabbi Heschel bravely announced, "An honest estimation of the moral state of our society will disclose: *Some are guilty, but all are responsible.*"² And when Dr. King was imprisoned three months later in Alabama, he wrote from Birmingham's jail, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."³ Their leadership shared a common message: Discrimination faced by African Americans was a scourge on *all* Americans, and justice could not be achieved unless society writ large could change.

/

We have come far in the past sixty years, but justice remains a long way off. The poverty rates of African Americans, for instance, have fallen dramatically, but the racial wealth gap has gotten worse. And while the law sees people of all races the same,

¹ In the conference program (see <https://heschel.jtsa.edu/national-conference-on-religion-and-race/>), Heschel's address was titled "The Religious Basis of Equality and Opportunity." It was republished as "Religion and Race." The text I quote here is from the version printed in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, first published 1966; these pages are from the 1984 reprinting), p. 85.

² "Religion and Race," *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 93. Italics in the original.

³ "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" has been republished widely. This text is from https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

trends in policing and incarceration are weighted strongly against people of color. Scholars and advocates like Michelle Alexander and Bryan Stevenson have continued to remind us of the tremendous work that remains in building a just society.

This continuing and consistent fight for justice spans eras and administrations. But minorities today are more vulnerable now than we've seen in a long time. The Supreme Court – once a vital instrument of achieving civil rights – has stripped women of their reproductive freedom and dismantled the remedial power of the Voting Rights Act. The President honors and elevates Christian nationalists committed to ridding America of its racial and religious diversity. And both political parties are locked in a battle of identity politics that pits groups of Americans against one other, forcing people to choose a tribe and defend it to the bitter end. Social media's addictive rage-baiting and the federal government's hypnotic propaganda turn American society into a reality TV show where each person acts as if everyone is against them, and our communities fall into distraction and disarray.

And look at the harm it's done. Bald racism has led to the harshest persecution of immigrants since the Eisenhower administration's grotesquely-named Operation Wetback. Naked sexism has launched a war against transgender Americans who yearn for the freedom of self-determination. And our own community faces antisemitic verbal and physical violence at levels we haven't seen in 80 years. A mass murder in Sydney, a synagogue assault in Manchester, and the hunting of Jewish sports fans in Amsterdam cast a global pall over domestic attacks like the shootings in Washington, D.C. and West Rogers Park as well innumerable incidents of verbal and physical abuse, synagogue and cemetery defilements, and intimidating graffiti like we've seen here in Hyde Park. Horrifically, the oldest synagogue in Mississippi and the official home of the Institute of Southern Jewish Life was brutally burned by an arson who was proud to torch what he called the "synagogue of Satan." While most Jews in America enjoy the privileges of economic and legal security that help us weather this antisemitic storm, we still know the power of persecution.

/

We might yearn in such a time for Goshen. Goshen was the area, our Torah tells us this week, where the Hebrews lived separated from Egyptians. During the plagues, God sets this region apart, warning Pharaoh "I will make a distinction between my people and yours" (Ex. 8:19). Goshen becomes a refuge, a sanctuary city of sorts, while the rest of Egypt falls to its knees. Maimonides, one of our tradition's greatest sages, taught 800 years ago – as a resident of a very different Egypt – a surprising lesson about the ten *nissim*, the ten marvels done for our ancestors in Egypt. He taught that the ten miracles were not the plagues themselves but rather the ten times the Hebrews were spared from their devastation.⁴ In their time of greatest need, God gave the Hebrews shelter from the storm that raged around them.

⁴ See Rambam's comment on Pirkei Avot 5:4.

But Goshen isn't very big. There's only room enough for those with the greatest need, those whose lives and freedoms are truly on the line. For all of us, times are hard. Yet for most, as Heschel taught, the exodus has already begun. Egypt may be all around us, but we are on our way out, marching, long and hard, toward the wilderness and then, at last, to freedom.

And as we march, we must learn from the mistakes of our ancestors. A passage in Pirkei Avot reminds us that the Hebrews, freed from slavery, repaid *nissim* (wonders) with *nisyonot* (trials); they turned signs to sighs and miracles to mumblings. עֲשָׂרָה נִסְיוֹנוֹת נִסּוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֶת הַמְּקוֹם בְּרוּךְ הוּא, "With ten trials did our ancestors try the Everpresent One" (Pirkei Avot 5:4). They demanded time and again a hasty retreat back to Goshen, their refuge of temporary respite from backbreaking oppression. They sought to abandon the difficult journey to freedom and submit themselves to false fantasies of comfort.

We may not do the same. We cannot be seduced into thinking that our problems are the world's worst and that we need salvation from some miraculous hand. Our sanctuary is not a place of surrender or retreat, nor is our dome a symbol of peace alone but also of motivation and hope, a reminder of survival through hard times and our responsibility to make a difference in the world. The greatest force arrayed against us is the one that would tear us apart, that would insinuate that the concerns of one group exclude all others and that limited resources must be snatched up by those with the best PR. And our greatest strength is our ability to overcome difference, to see the value in the upbuilding of others, and our willingness to commit to minority coalitions that, when working together, make society better for all people, not just themselves.

Dr. King's last book was called *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* He included there a passage from his Nobel Prize lecture that's as relevant today as six decades ago:

We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interests who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.⁵

America is diverse, like it or not.

Well: I like it, and we know who doesn't.

And if we want to preserve the very special beauty of America and honor its sacred spirit, we must take our place in the great mosaic of peoples who call this country home. We can stand up for ourselves as long as we stand up for others as well,

⁵ *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 167. The words used here are from the 2010 reprinting and differ very slightly from the original version, which also appeared as part of King's 1964 Nobel Prize Lecture, "The Quest for Peace and Justice" (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>).

and we can maintain safe havens for those in need without sacrificing our own wellbeing.

Our prayerbook says it best

Standing on the parted shores of history,
we still believe what we were taught
before ever we stood at Sinai:

that wherever we are, it is eternally Egypt
that there is a better place, a Promised Land;
that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness

that there is no way to get from here to there
except by joining hands, marching
together.⁶

Where do we go from here? As Dr. King taught us: “our end is a community at peace with itself.”⁷ So we go toward beloved community, knit together as people of every race and age. We go toward justice, even if it requires sacrifice and discomfort. And we go toward peace, peace across and through and within and without lines of difference. There can be no other way.

⁶ *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (CCAR Press 2007, p. 157). This is based on Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), which concludes: “We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what it has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form: first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt; second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and third, that ‘the way to the land is through the wilderness’ [W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 60]. There is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands and marching” (149).

⁷ “The Quest for Peace and Justice,” <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>