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The Stone We Come From and The Dreams We Have

Unlike the Washington Monument that is easily seen from afar in Washington DC, the newly opened Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial is not visible roadside. Instead, you approach the memorial from Independence Avenue entering through a narrow passage between two granite mounds representing a “mountain of despair” and a “stone of hope” referred to in King’s famous “I Have A Dream Speech.” And then as you continue to enter the memorial park, you walk past the words of King engraved on the surrounding walls. You see that some of the quotes on walls are familiar like the one that urges his followers in Montgomery, Alabama to work until “justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Others are more obscure like “True peace is not the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.” You continue to approach King from the side, where more quotes are engraved.

Finally you circle to the front of the 30 foot high statue of MLK. Seeing it is overwhelming, comforting, sad and inspiring all at the same time. The granite is carved so that King emerges from the raw stone – bumpy and craggy and uneven. The raw stone serves as a powerful symbol for not just King’s past but all of our pasts. The stone that King emerges from, like our very origin, is undetermined by us. The raw stone is our past, our history, our colour, our religion, our reality that we are born into. None of us gets to choose that. None of us has a say in the raw material of which we are made. That the stone that King was carved from, both physically and metaphorically was that of an African American man in the mid- 20th century meant he was born into a marginality of sorts. And he wouldn't have it any other way. How do we know? Because In Memphis TN on April 3, 1968, the night before he died he told us.

He said, “[if] I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?” - I would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt ... across the Red Sea, ... on toward the promised land. And ... I wouldn't stop there. I would move on by Greece, and take my mind to Mount Olympus. ... I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire. ... But I wouldn't stop there. I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all that the Renaissance did ... But I wouldn't stop there. ... I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating president by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. But I wouldn't stop there..... 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 20th century, I will be happy.”

King did not let that stone he was carved from weigh him down. It did, perhaps, even empower him. It created in him a way to think creatively and meaningfully about the role of race in American society so that suffering could be transformed into success. The confident, youthful King of the sculpture you take in at the memorial epitomizes that embrace of who he was and how that acceptance of who he was never was a detriment and always an honor. You notice King’s gaze in the memorial is strong and direct and clear. But as you scan down the memorial,

the memorial changes. Another symbolic feature becomes apparent. This King memorial has no feet. The chiseled stone fades into the raw stone at King's knees. King is almost other-worldly, as if his feet are hidden by a cloud or in the midst of a dream. It is perhaps a message that it is up to you, to us to continue the walk that King started as he was cut off before his time.

And between the raw stone and the dream lies the reality of life both in our age, King's age and truly all ages. This reality between raw stone and dream is between the past we have come from and the future not yet realized. This is epitomized in the very words of Unataneh Tokef the prayer we read on this most awesome day. Who will die and who will come to be, who by water, who by fire. These tremendous words remind us of the things we can't control. The misfortunes in society. The repression. The poverty. The economy. What is harsh and difficult about life and living. No doubt King is the only non-president memorialized on the Mall in Washington not just because of the directness of his life but the harshness of his death. This day like that memorial looms large. Beautiful yet painful.

About 2000 feet away from the brand new King memorial lies the 89 year old Lincoln Memorial. Set inside a Greek temple modeled after the Parthenon, sits Lincoln, American flag draped behind him. Visiting Chesterwood this summer in the Berkshires, the place where Daniel Chester French designed the sculpture of Lincoln in the Memorial, I learned that as the Lincoln sculpture was being installed it was realized the statue of Lincoln was not going to be large enough to fill the space of the setting that surrounded it. With that, an 11 foot pedestal was created for the seated Lincoln to rest upon and if you have visited you know that Lincoln fills the space with majesty and dignity today. Lincoln was certainly massive at 19 feet high when originally designed. It is amazing to think that it was not large enough, even in its massive form, to fill the space it had been given. I am preoccupied by this image of the shortfall of the Lincoln sculpture filling its space as a metaphor of the space we occupy on this planet, in this world, that we are not currently filling.

Of course there is the literal height and width and depth that we occupy. But beyond that is the space we fill with our actions, our aspirations, our presence, our love. The impact we have long after we have left a room. What of the unrealized impact we have yet to have? The change we can bring about? The taller we can stand and fill our space. Do we walk out of services today realizing that Unataneh Tokef is not just a list of terrible things that can come to us in the year ahead but that we have the power in our hands to temper it?

The powerful unataneh tokef grants room for change. For after the list of what is ordained for the year ahead there is given an empowering statement... "BUT Repentance, prayer and charity temper Judgement's severe decree." On this day we must remember we are not powerless. No one can take away our ability to dream and change and better society. No one can take away our ability to contemplate how can things get better at this moment. On this day, we do not read only the first half of the Unataneh tokef that lists the acts of G-d to come but we also read the second half of Unataneh Tokef that reminds us that the acts of humans make such a difference. Certainly we don't get to choose to avoid the difficulties and tragedies and obstacles and hurdles that come our way, but we do get to choose how we react to them. Are we living life in a way that says, I have a hand in this too? If only we would fill our space. If that impact we are having is not substantial enough we can change it, if only we would.

The early rabbis struggled with this dichotomy of what is in our control and what is beyond our control. And they imagined G-d struggling with that very same concept. When G-d created world G-d, the rabbis imagined, G-d originally thought it would be best to create the world only with the divine attribute of justice. Because after all G-d is just. And then G-d looked to the future and realized if G-d created the world with only justice the world could not exist. So G-d decided to create the world with only compassion. For compassion too is a divine attribute. And then G-d looked at the future and realized if the world was created with just compassion there would be anarchy and chaos. There has to be a limit to all things. The world is like a fragile vessel – If you put only boiling water it can't be held in your hands. If you put only ice cold water it can't be held in your hands. You must put a mixture of the two. And so G-d put forth both possibilities in the world. And we are partners with G-d in both those possibilities.

Judaism creates the space for both. Today, on this day of Yom Kippur, it is possible to at the same time feel awe at our Creator who has such power in the world and simultaneously feel empowered to partner with G-d to make change as beings created in G-d's very image. Jewish Philosopher Michael Walzer said, "Human beings have the capacity to restore this ethical and spiritual unity. The G-d of the universe has made it so that the transcendence and transformation of the world are both possible and necessary. The obligation of those who are spiritually alive...is... not to pursue [only] their own paths, but to become involved in the struggle, return to Egypt, fight the Pharaoh, change the consciousness of the slaves so that they come to see themselves as potentially free, and lead them through the process through which that transformation can begin to happen." (Walzer, Moses and the Revolutionary Community) And then Walzer reminds us who is our model for this? Moses As Walzer notes, "Moses is not the first person to recognize the spiritual reality [of G-d as the One that sends us into the face of injustice]. But he is one of the first to hear a voice from the fire of G-d's passion that requires us to struggle against existing systems of oppression." Moses had a choice. Unlike the other children of Israel, he was raised in Pharaoh's home and he could have stayed comfortable. Thousands of years before there was a King or a Lincoln this man Moses realized the plight of our oppressed people in the midst of G-d's universe and stood up to a Pharaoh who had deadened our people.

Does only Moses or Lincoln or MLK have the power to change the reality of this world? To take the bad and repair it? Yom Kippur is a day for us to make a change too. To make the choice to realize that it is not only a Moses or a Lincoln or an MLK who can make a difference. But to confront that the message of our holiday liturgy is that we each have the very potential that lies in each of those men. As the great Hasidic Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik said "If it possible for Moses to be G-d's messenger, then it is possible for every Jew."

Right before going out to services Erev Rosh Hashana I turned to a congregant who had recently sold his business asking what he was up to. I was inspired when he told me had been giving a lot of time volunteering at Boca Helping Hands our local food pantry where the YK food you bring tomorrow/today will go. "What made you do it?" I asked him. I wanted to hear from him the secret key to getting the volunteers to come and care and better the world we have inherited. My neighbor, he said. A retired Auto industry exec and this is his passion. So if Moses is not your inspiration, let it be your neighbor, your friend, your clergy, your kids, your parents that inspire

you to act. Leading by example, it is person by person that we can have the impact to take what is broken in this world and fix it.

Temple Beth El is taking on its own social action project this year by participating in Family Promise, the Boca Raton mobile homeless shelters that houses people at churches and synagogues around the community, one week at a time. The families that are housed in the Family Promise program are the marginal people of today's world. Through one circumstance or another they have become homeless. It is difficult to imagine life as part of a homeless family and if not for this program, we could easily ignore this segment of society. Family Promise exists to help these families get back on their feet again, out of homelessness and back into society at large. Their marginality can be made temporary with the help of others. With the help of us. If we could walk away from everyday saying I made someone's life better, wouldn't that mean bettering our own?

That message was not lost on Moses nor Lincoln nor King. And this day asks that it not be lost on you. That is what are we here for – to confront what is determined and change what is wrong. The Rabbis understood Torah given by G-d was only an outline for guiding our lives. It is up to us to decide how we will carry out the messages contained in Torah to impact the world we live in. That we remember that Judaism is a religion born of idealism and that people at their best selves can act *btselem elohim*, in the image of G-d.

For while the Lincoln Memorial is majestic, Lincoln is seated and the marble while beautiful, is unable to free him from his bounds. And while the King memorial is powerful, the MLK portrayed in the sculpture has no feet. Instead his body merges into the stone of the sculpture and we are left to give it movement.

And while they may not build memorials to us on the Mall in Washington DC, there is no reason to live life with any less passion or zeal than those who do have memorials built to them. As the late Steve Jobs said in his commencement address at Stanford University in 2005... "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary."

On this day of Yom Kippur let your heart and your intuition be open to the very essence of this day. Together let's fight the Pharaohs, carve through mountains and fill our space. May this be G-ds will. Shana Tova.