

"May I ask who's calling?"

Parashat Shmot

Shabbat before the inauguration of Barack Obama

January 16, 2009

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[inspired by Rachel Timoner's senior sermon at HUC/d'var Torah at PARR]

Had he lived, Martin Luther King, Jr. would have celebrated his 80th birthday yesterday. The same age as Moses in the latter part of this week's Torah portion when he "turns aside to look at a marvelous sight – and asks, why doesn't the bush burn up?" [Ex. 3:2-3]

"And *when* God saw that Moses turned aside to look, God called to him from inside the bush: 'don't come any closer. Take off your shoes for the place upon which you stand: it's holy ground.' And then God tells Moses to lead his people out of their enslavement in Egypt.

"Who am I [to take on this task]?" asks Moses.

"You're the one who will be with Me," answers God [lit. "Because I'll be with you" Ex. 3:12]. To which Moses replies, "Who are You?" They go back and forth about all this for a while, until God will take no more excuses, "You're the one that I want," says God (well, okay, I've paraphrased that line a bit).

In his *Writer's Almanac* yesterday, Garrison Keillor took note that Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was "26 years old, when he was chosen to lead a boycott of segregated buses. He didn't set out to become a civil rights activist, and he said later that if he'd known what the job would entail, he might have turned it down."

Surely no one has missed the beauty of Barack Obama being inaugurated the day after the national holiday known as Martin Luther King Day. Nor the high expectations that come whenever Obama and King are mentioned in the same sentence. Obama himself has not invoked the parallels between him and King nearly as much as between him and Abraham Lincoln: though he accepted the Democratic Party nomination 45 years to the day of King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, he made only passing reference then to "a preacher from Georgia." On the other hand, Obama announced his candidacy in front of the Lincoln statue in Springfield, IL, he's often seen reading books about Lincoln, he has chosen to take the oath of office on the same copy of the Bible that Lincoln used (the first president since to do so), and I read today that he took his family to visit the Lincoln memorial the other day:

Speaking to the *Washington Post*, Obama gave an account of his family "field trip" to the Lincoln Memorial where there is an inscribed copy of the 16th President's famous Second Inaugural speech. At this point, Obama's 7 year-old daughter *Sasha* asked her father if he would be giving a similar speech. [Obama describes the interaction to the Post](#):

"And I said, 'Well, actually, that's a short version, but yeah, I will,' " Obama recalled. "And then *Malia* says, 'First African American president -- it better be good.' "So I just want you to know the pressures I'm under here from my children.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/16/obamas-daughter-on-inauguration_158476.html]

As a Lincoln fan myself, I appreciate that President-elect Obama appreciates Lincoln's legacy, and learns from him. (even if I also worry that it's a bit chutzapidik – is he learning from Lincoln or just suggesting he's as great as Lincoln?)

As a fierce advocate for the separation of church and state, I am glad that Obama doesn't compare himself more to the preacher from Georgia, though surely he admires him as well.

Our friend and teacher, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, has for many years taken the occasion of MLK day and the *yahrzeit* of King's friend Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to remind us of the political and spiritual relationship of those two "preachers." This year in the synchronicity of Heschel's *yahrzeit*, King's birthday, and Obama's inauguration, Rabbi Waskow suggests we allow ourselves to be inspired by all three of these leaders and make a pledge this weekend, Rabbi Waskow says -- something you can commit to doing -- to help bring their vision of a better world into existence. I have copies of his pledge forms for us tonight -- I encourage you to take one home and take it seriously [see copy at end of this document].

In his invitation, Rabbi Waskow also reprinted a lesser known speech by Dr. King, given at the Riverside Church in NYC – [where another kindred spirit, Rev. William Sloane Coffin presided] - on April 4, 1967 – exactly one year before he was killed. It was a speech in opposition to the war in Vietnam (another of the causes that King and Heschel joined forces on). I wanted to read a few sentences from it, for it seems so relevant still, all these decades later:

BEYOND VIETNAM: A TIME TO BREAK SILENCE

Martin Luther King

[Dr. King gave this speech at Riverside Church, New York City, 4 April 1967, exactly one year before he was killed.] <http://www.shalomctr.org/node/71>

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.

A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: "This way of settling differences is not just."

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values.

Garrison Keillor's little biography of Dr. King pointed out that "during the bus boycott, during which he was assaulted and arrested and his house was bombed, King – the guy who didn't want the job of being a leader -- experienced what he described as a religious conversion. He realized that the civil rights movement was greater than King himself, greater than his own doubts, and that he had to act like a charismatic figurehead, even if he didn't feel like one. He said: 'As I became involved, and as people began to derive inspiration from their involvement, I realized that the choice leaves your own hands. The people expect you to give them leadership.'"

<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2009/01/15>

In this week's Torah portion, Sh'mot, Moses – in his fourth of five attempts to get God to pick somebody else, says, "Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. Not yesterday nor the day before – nor since you spoke to me [today]!" [4:10]

God doesn't accept Moses' resignation, however. I'll send your brother Aaron with you – *he's* a good talker, says God, and *I'll* be with you.

"And so Moses went," [ex. 4:18] says our text, which you might think is the end of the story, but of course it is just the beginning of the rest of the story – a very long story indeed – a story we are still telling; a story each of us plays a role in.

Moses, Lincoln, King, Heschel, Obama – reluctant or enthusiastic – they all heard themselves called in some way.

When we hear about the calling of such giants, it is easy for us to take the route Moses tried to take – easy for us to say, oh good, let somebody else do it. And in some ways those guys have it easy – they are called loud and clear – in ways that are hard to ignore. But what about you? What about me? What are we called to do? And by whom? For we all are – in some way – in more than one way probably. The trick - the challenge - is to hear our call. It is in fact what President-elect Obama has asked of us – he's not going to do this alone – not and succeed anyway. It is what Rabbi Waskow asks us to think about with his pledge to action.

So this weekend, as the inauguration festivities begin, and on Monday – King's birthday – and on Tuesday as we watch Obama place his hand on Abraham Lincoln's Bible – and as we watch the millions? Will it be millions? – of people gather in our nation's capital to witness it as well. Even as we listen to Rev. Rick Warren give his invocation, and as we listen to Bishop Gene Robinson – yeah! – give his invocation at the Lincoln Memorial Sunday – I invite us to think, and watch, and LISTEN – to what are we being called? As a community, as a congregation, and each of us – individually – what is it we are meant to do?

It's one of those times, and one of those places, the kind we read about – no matter where you watch on Tuesday – take off your shoes. For the place on which *you* will be standing? “It's holy ground.”

Shabbat shalom

REBIRTHING KING, RE-INAUGURATING AMERICA: A PLEDGE ON JANUARY 19-20, 2009

On this rebirthing day, January 19, 2009, Martin Luther King's Birthday, on the eve of there coming into office a new government to represent the American people, I join in covenant with other Americans: -- I commit myself to give a new birth in America and in the world to the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, to call ourselves and every nation now to develop an overriding loyalty to humankind as a whole, in order to preserve the best in our individual societies; I commit myself to work toward a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond any tribe, race, class, or nation; to call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all humanity and for the web of life upon our planet; I commit myself to fuse power with compassion, might with morality, and strength with sight; to choose nonviolent coexistence rather than violent co-annihilation; to speak for peace and justice throughout the world -- within and beyond our doors and shores. I commit myself to take the following specific actions: [For example: "I will work for a peaceful settlement of the Iraq war and an end to US military presence there"; "I will use less gasoline"; "I will read one of Martin Luther King's speeches that I have not read"; "I will write my Senators about subsidizing railroads and solar/ wind energy instead of autos, coal, and oil"; "I will work for the hospitality-for-the-homeless program in my church, synagogue, or mosque." Fill in as follows:]

I do this in the knowledge that tomorrow is today, that we are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long, hard, and beautiful struggle for a new world.

(Signed) _____

(Print Name) _____

Address _____

Phone/s _____

Email _____

(Please send one copy of this pledge to : Tent of Abraham, Hagar, & Sarah, 6711 Lincoln Drive, Philadelphia PA 19119, if possible with a (tax-deductible) contribution to support this effort.)