

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration

1/16/12 –Temple Torah, Boynton Beach, FL

Rabbi Sid Shanken, “Reflections of My Experience As A Freedom Rider”

Thank you, Alan for those kind words-but you reminded me of the old Jewish joke-“you forgot my modesty”.

Rabbi Bernstein, congratulations to you and the congregation on your beautiful installation yesterday. May you have many happy years here

Ariella, God bless you and your committee for this Mitzvah day. I always have taught my classes of every age- a definition of Judaism is – DOING GOD’S MITZVOT. You are giving life to that definition.

On this day that a grateful nation celebrates Martin Luther King, I would like to share with you some of my personal encounters with this great man to help feel his message. It is ironic that the man that successfully led our nation to legally free his people had the name that is so common among Black families. Its origin is that it was used by the slave owners sarcastically to slaves that appeared to them as resentful or proud-to put them down!

My story begins when I was a 13-year-old in the South, in San Antonio, Texas, where I grew up. I was going downtown on the bus. Most kids like to sit in the back of the bus-so I rushed to the back of the empty bus. In the South the buses had a sliding sign-COLORED on one side, WHITE on the other-to segregate the buses-. The driver turned and shouted “Hey kid, ya can’t sit theah. That’s fo colored folk”- I shouted back, “My mother’s colored”-“OK”” When I got off the bus I didn’t want to lie so I shouted , “She’s pink!” and ran. I told this to my mother and she was so proud of me. I saw tears in her eyes- I had learned from my parents-brotherhood from our Bible-“ HALO AV ECHAD LCHULANU,HALO EL ECHAD BRAANU” Have we not all one Father- Has not one God created us all” Isaiah, the Prophet.-

I hated the persecution of the Blacks, the White water fountains, Colored water fountains White-colored waiting rooms, restaurants where the Colored father taking his family to dinner had to go to the back, to the kitchen and take the food out “somewhere”. Even in the army years later. In the movies. In combat. The White soldiers and the Blacks were separated- but the White German prisoners sat with the Whites! Can you imagine if it were still the same, without our King ? But Jews could do little to help---the southern Jews did give money to NAACP- secretly.

Along came this Baptist minister from a church in Montgomery, Alabama and led us into, what I see as the final battle of the “American 100 year war”-the 1860’s to the 1960’s to stop the persecution of a group of Americans. The term CIVIL WAR is an oxymoron-no war is civil-it was the civil RIGHTS war.

I saw Martin Luther King in 3 of the 5 or 6 Freedom rides I was on. The first was Birmingham, Ala. I still see in my mind BULL CONNORS the police chief with his riding breeches, boots to his knees, holding a whip commanding the firemen to turn the fire-hose on the demonstrators- they could eviscerate a man close- and then DOGS turned on the demonstrators, but for some political reason, they avoided the many rabbis—

-When we 19 Conservative rabbis had flown down to Birmingham, from the Rabbinical Convention in the Concord hotel 1963. we were met at the air field in Birmingham 2 A.M. by the local Jewish leaders “a bomb had been found in the Synagogue 2 weeks ago, it didn’t go off because of a bad fuse.” I replied, that was 2 weeks before we came-you are in a battle field, either join us or get out of the way. They kindly offered if we are arrested, to put up bail. I thanked them but said , “don’t put up bail for us unless you do it for all arrested

The police avoided us though I am sure our being there encouraged Blacks. They re-formed and continued-so Connors arrested a few- and –what a sight!-- the young pounded on the paddy wagons-“ ARREST ME TOO”- and the jails were filled and they filled the football field– it’s called the Childrens’ Crusade. 3000 people, mostly high school kids. King too was arrested and he wrote his famous “Letter from a Montgomery jail” in jail- on the margins of newspapers. They denied him stationary.

Governor Wallace sent state troopers to help Connors. Pres. Kennedy prepared the national guard and the army 2nd infantry to stand by. A shooting battle was about to erupt. Thank God the city backed down.

King was released as were the others. Finally, The city desegregated, and the AFL-CIO union paid the bail and it led to the Civil Rights act of 1964.

I can still see King sitting in the compound of the colored motel where I was staying, sitting on a straight chair in the hot sun wearing a suit and tie, surrounded by reporters for an hour shooting questions which he answered coolly, in every sense of the word.

Then he came to my motel room filled with the other Conservative Rabbi. He spoke of Martin Buber’s I-thou PHILOSOPHY.

Then that night he spoke in the 19th St Baptist church in THEIR idiom- I was amazed how he could go from idiom to idiom. He was hypnotic in any dialect – when he spoke, everyone is thinking –“don’t stop”- he had a gift of weaving Biblical verses into his talk. He was a biblical prophet- Even his , “ I HAVE DREAM” speech was a quote from Genesis . Pharaoh, king of Egypt said, “chalom chalamti-“I HAD a dream” but King made it “I Have a dream.”-for us today. His initials -MLK=Hebrew KING—but his EYES captured me. Kind, but strong-inner directed , here is a man who even against the world changed the world.

Later I heard rabbi MOSHE KAHANA, cousin of rabbi Meir Kahana but completely opposite. A sweet, kind man-a European Holocaust survivor then in a Synagogue in Houston Texas in

that same 16th street Baptist church telling the full church “ The last time I saw dogs turned on civilians was in NAZI Germany” the walls shook from the audience applauding.

I had to follow these acts ! I told them the same talk I gave many times, always with the same reaction-words are powerful-they must be used for good-I said “I want to tell you what you already know, but you gotta hear it from me, a White man-Your mother is as good as my mother, your wife is as dear as my wife, your children are as precious. as my children, and you are as good a man as I -maybe better- but you got to prove it,- you got to fight peacefully for your rights. It’s better to stand on your two feet for a minute than to crawl on your hands And knees all your life.” -Again I see the EYES-they’re forever changed! No man hearing that can ever be the same again. And they nodded-and we won because of their courage , and the American Government’s great, democratic constitution and MARTIN LUTHER KING’S LEADERSHIP. God Bless him.

The price we paid was high-not only the 250,000 Yankee soldiers killed in the war between the FREE states and the SLAVE states a 100 years ago, but also the hundreds of people lynched by the then evil South and also the 4 little girls killed in the bombing of that 16th street Baptist church in Birmingham where we spoke-going to Sunday school in their beautiful dresses and giggling and dancing along the way, and the 3 Freedom Riders in Birmingham,- one of whom was a Jew-they made a movie of it- and later, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King shot down at the age of 39 .

In Selma, Alabama again I saw him at the bridge that we were forbidden by local ordinance to cross –Rabbi Abraham Heschel, professor of our Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary, interlocked one arm with Rev King –and REV. WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN, chaplain of Yale and later, minister of the Riverside church in New York ,on the other arm.

I was in the back with 100 others and we crossed the bridge.- again his EYES- but this time I saw FEAR in them , as any combat veteran can tell you, courage is not NOT being afraid , but being afraid and still doing what you want to do-That’s courage. King was awaiting that bullet with his name on it by a hit man every moment - but he went on doing what he knew was right. That’s courage !!

What was the attitude of the Jews in the North to King and the Freedom Riders? On my 1st ride I did not tell the board-I was going- I didn’t want anyone to think I need permission to do my duty. I did TELL the president, Irv Weis, and he blessed me, and I made arrangements with Rabbi Bill Horn of Summit, NJ, my neighbor, for emergencies. When I got back from the ride, the board called a special meeting. That night at the meeting, the congregants filled the library meeting room in the Shul, they filled the-foyer, they filled the entrance and they spilled into the-street! One of my happiest moments. The board quickly passed a resolution condoning the rabbi and a motion to print it in the local newspaper – so I went on 4 more rides. I was even arrested in a little town in the Mississippi Delta-but the charges were dropped.

And the Jews in the South? Rabbi Moshe Kahana of Houston, Texas is illustrative. When he got back he went to Friday Night Services -- as he walked down the aisle the entire Congregation stood up and applauded him.

When he was tragically murdered, BAD, self-appointed leaders fanned the flames of anger to gain control and changed the wonderful picture of King. But King still won-from the grave- you can temporarily divert truth but not for ever.

But also –IF – IF we Jews didn't help a persecuted population in our midst when we had a chance –Did we have a right to expect the Europeans to help us when we were persecuted !? We had to vindicate Jewish suffering. History will record that we were not only interested in our own suffering but kept the mitzvah of Vahavta et ha-ger-thou shalt love the minority for you were a minority in the land of Egypt and you know the heart of the minority. God forbid we failed that test.

I'm proud to say 40% of most freedom groups were Jews ,mostly young college kids-our son Zev was one of them a freedom rider in Maryland and North Dakota–and also many WHITES of all religions

19 Conservative rabbis were freedom riders, and there were many Reform and Orthodox rabbis . We have a right to be proud of our people and of America.

(to our Hebrew School students I say on this Mitzvah Day, be loyal to your religion and the American Constitution.We believe in Mitsvot. God wants us to help people . We're proud of you being here today)

I conclude with a quote from a book Rev King must have read,Martin Buber's "Ten Rungs"

IF YOU WANT TO RAISE A MAN FROM MUD AND FILTH, DO NOT THINK IT IS ENOUGH TO STAY ON TOP AND REACH A HELPING HAND DOWN TO HIM.YOU MUST GO ALL THE WAY DOWN , YOU YOURSELF DOWN INTO THE MUD AND FILTH, THEN TAKE HOLD OF HIM WITH STRONG HANDS AND PULL HIM AND YOURSELF OUT INTO THE LIGHT.

GOD BLESS MARTIN LUTHER KING. MAY HE INSPIRE US ALWAYS TO DO GOD'S MITSVOT.