

The Longevity of a Vision: Where do we go from here?

A commemoration speech in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

By Rabbi Brad Bloom, January 14, 2010

I would like to express my gratitude to the Dr. Martin Luther King Committee for extending to me this invitation to speak to you tonight. In particular, it is an honor and privilege to share this pulpit with my esteemed colleague Pastor Ben Williams. His place as the longest serving clergyman on Hilton Head is a blessing for the entire religious community.

We should not underestimate the power of longevity, particularly in the service of God. Dr. King did not attain that blessing. Yet, on the other hand, his ideas and his beliefs in the triumph of justice gave him a different kind of longevity. The fact that we are here tonight proves that Dr. King's spiritual life was long and bountiful. And, when we quote his words or bring to fruition his hopes of equality for African Americans or other citizens of America freed from the chains of hatred, we know Dr. King lives on today and tomorrow.

Longevity is a blessing for human kind. People have a lifespan and questions have their own longevity too. The first question ever asked in human history was when God asked Adam, "Where are you?" It was a question that penetrated his conscience when he disobeyed the Almighty by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The question 'Where are you' meant 'What are you going to do now Adam?' 'How are you going to turn your life around now that I have caught you sinning for the first time?'

The prophets of the Bible asked that question of their own people. They saw a similar kind of rebellion in ancient Israel that betrayed the teachings of the Scripture. That same question had a longevity that extends to our own times especially when Dr. King asked it in a 1967 speech he addressed to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In his presidential speech to this organization he asked, "Where do we go from here?" In effect he was asking his own loyalists the same question. "Where are you?" and we are asking this question even more

today. Yes, questions like ideas themselves can have great longevity and it is our task to pose the question of where we are going with the vision that Dr. King laid out to us back then?

The answer to this question is to not lose sight of the question. Sure the events of this past year, the election of President Barak Obama, the appointment of Attorney General Eric Holder, would have been unthinkable in Dr. King's times. We finally saw a long awaited spark in the American electorate that content of character trumped the color of skin. Of course we know that Dr. King's vision is far from complete, yet we have beheld sacred moments that fulfilled our hopes in a way that surprised us as much as it inspired us. Hatred, fear, and prejudice still exist. They reside in hiding inside the souls of many Americans. The presidential election gave us all a first step into the Promised Land, yet we know the journey for equal opportunity, human dignity and respect for all Americans continues. The march to freedom for all who are schooled in the suffering of the oppressed is a long way off but we still ask the question. The longevity of the question itself will help us to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Truth has its own kind of longevity. People close their eyes, turn their heads away or refuse to listen, but the truth never goes away. We see the truth in our hopes and we see the truth in our fears. Over the last two months, I saw two versions of two very different truths that have great longevity. In November, I spent the afternoon touring the Martin Luther King Center, including the home where Dr. King grew up. I stood by the tombs of Dr. and Mrs. King and I felt in this moment the truth of his life's work and the sacrifice as well. It is a holy place, sacred to the core of the American experience.

The second place I visited a few weeks ago was in Biloxi, Mississippi, at the home of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. The home itself is of minor interest but three hundred yards behind the Davis house was a Confederate Cemetery including the tomb of the unknown Confederate soldier. I watched the people walking around the cemetery and observed their sense of respect and awe for

this cemetery which was their holy place. I could not get it. How could it be that people could stand with such pride over a cause so morally repugnant?

I suppose I have got a lot to learn about the south but I do know that the longevity of hope for the cause of justice must prevail. With hopes that never die like the abolition of slavery and the end of Jim Crow, we face new challenges for every positive achievement we make for civil rights. While I was strolling around the Confederate Military Cemetery, I met up with a college instructor in American history. This white woman filled in the gaps of my civil war history knowledge. At the end of our tour she said to me, "the greatest fear I have is for the well being of President of Barak Obama. I pray for him every night because I know and he knows that someone could take him out." She concluded, "You take a risk when you get too close to the truth."

We should never underestimate the power of symbols. Their longevity enables them to either camouflage our fears or inspire our hopes. We also must be painfully honest even with the symbols that we choose to embrace. When I stood at the tomb of Dr King I asked, 'Are we living up in our own lives to the message of Dr. King's vision? In 2010 can we, the choir of this vision, trust each other? How many of us can honestly say we have a close personal friend from another race? How many of us can say we have shared a meal in a home of someone from a different race? And how many of us can say that if our children came home with a boy or girl friend who was from another race that we would not mind or be somewhat suspicious?

Dr. King in that 1967 speech said that in Roget's thesaurus, 60 of the 120 synonyms for the word black were offensive. Once again, prejudice perpetuates a different kind of longevity. It is not about fear but about not believing in ourselves. A recent CNN television report on a recent study from Harvard showed two black children in separate film clips each holding a black and white doll. In each case the voice of the teacher is heard asking the children to choose which doll is better and in both cases they choose the white doll. The teacher asks them

why choose the white doll? They answer white is better than black. They don't know why they just know it is true.

Longevity is a mixed blessing. It can perpetuate the hurt we commit against others but it can preserve the hurt we feel from a culture that values white over all other races. That is why Dr. King answered his own question about where we go from here by saying, "First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth."

Dr King concluded that speech to the SCLC by discussing his ideas of divine dissatisfaction and facing up against an audacious faith in the future. He understood that if the Torah says that man was created in the image of God and that human beings could not accept that it applied to all of us, then we were not done pursuing racial equality. Divine dissatisfaction compels us to include the black woman, the Native American Indians, the poor white child in Appalachia, the Asian and Hispanic Americans amongst many other racial and religious groups.

This is exactly what the biblical prophets were talking about thousands of years ago. The longevity of the bible's message resounds for all generations. We cannot succumb to the temptation of accepting the status quo. We cannot confuse divine dissatisfaction with disloyalty to America.

The sages of Judaism taught 2000 years ago that the reason that the Romans conquered Jerusalem and exiled the Jewish people from their homeland in Israel was ultimately due to internal dissension and baseless hatred. We made ourselves vulnerable morally and spiritually and that made us a target for Roman hegemony.

Dr. King also understood that it would be our internal vulnerability that would lead to our demise more than any foreign force. The change we need tomorrow is not only about jobs and health care and education; we need reform desperately but where we must go is beyond the barriers of our communities and talk to each other and socialize and break bread and learn how to live with each other.

My people held on to a belief to return to their homeland for 2000 years. Longevity of faith and hope was the meal we ate each day. My people is a determined people who understand both in modern and ancient terms the longevity of prejudice, hatred and faith too. We did not let those fears prevail. In fact, the national anthem of the state of Israel is called "HaTikvah", The Hope.

Dr. King embraced that biblical message of prophetic hope. He wrote in his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech.

"I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemption good will proclaim the rule of the land. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and no one shall be afraid." I still believe that we shall overcome."

The longevity of hope is the greatest gift god gave Dr. King and all of us. May his memory be a blessing.