



Parashat Shemot

Got MLK?: Mourning the Losses and Celebrating the Victories [1]

by Chaim Moshe HaLevi (Marc Howard Landas) on Friday January 16, 2009

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Exodus 1:1 - 6:1, Inauguration 2009 and MLK Jr Day

“We may not be able to heal all the injustices in the world at once, but if we pursue a life based on the foundation of truth and justice, treating others ever more fairly and honestly, then we bring ourselves, and the world in which we live, ever so much closer to our goal.” Commentary on Parashat Shoftim, by Kolel: [The Adult Center for Liberal Jewish Learning](#).

Throughout our lives we look for role models to emulate. As children these may be relatives, teachers, sports figures, or superheroes. As we go from adolescent to teenager these categories expand to cover television and movie stars, singers and dancers. Yet, if one asked an adult about role models, generally this list would widen to include important historical figures who have impacted civilization through their contributions to the arts, humanities, and sciences. Often the names that come to mind include various leaders who sacrificed everything for justice: Moses, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Anwar Sadat, and Yitzchak Rabin. For some of them, the sacrifice included their very lives.

For those who came of age during the 1960s, names of certain role models stand out: John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. All three were murdered for advancing civil rights in a society that demanded change. Given the legacy of the first two, it is no surprise that Ted and Caroline Kennedy were staunch supporters of the election of the first African-American President of the United States of America. But, it wasn't just the Kennedys who facilitated the fulfillment of this dream. It was hundreds of thousands of voters across this great nation who emulated Howard Beale and the hundreds of viewers whom he persuaded to shout out their windows in the 1976 film *Network*, showing the GOP they were “mad as hell and not going to take this anymore!” And so, with the use of 21st century technology, this modern day miracle was manifested into reality some forty years after the assassination of Dr. King.

For Jews, the number 40 is especially significant. From all indications, the number 40 represents the completion of a process, be it positive or negative. According to Torah, an embryo develops into a fetus in 40 days. The process of Moses acquiring the Torah took 40 days and 40 nights. It took 40 days for Moses to plead with God to earn Israel's forgiveness (and a new set of tables



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of the law) after the incident with the golden calf. Likewise, it was in the fortieth year of wandering in the desert that the Israelites were finally forgiven for the sin of the spies. (In which, after surveying Canaan, said spies came back with a report replete with hyperbole saying the people would not be able to take over the land because giants were living there. Only Caleb and Joshua did not participate in this lie.) All living things, except Noah and those with him in the Ark, were killed during 40 days of the Flood. A *mikveh* (Jewish ritual bath) must contain a minimum of 40 measures of water. ([Orthodox Union Torah Tidbits](#))

But is this week's inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama really the endpoint in a process? Hardly. It is, I believe, a turning point in a much larger progression – the achievement of King's dream of complete equality for all citizens of the United States of America, irrespective of sex, race, color, religion, creed, age, national origin, ancestry, pregnancy, marital status or parental status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability. To that end this is especially important for those who are twice blessed, Jews who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and questioning.

This coming June, LGBTIQ people will mark 40 years since the Stonewall Riots of 1969. This anniversary will be commemorated across the globe through various events including a ruby (the traditional 40th anniversary gift) themed Heritage of Pride celebration in New York City during which I personally hope to make Dorothy proud! Like our African-American sisters and brothers, our struggle for gay rights has been an uphill battle and we are far from MLK's vision of the Promised Land. We too have faced hardship and suffered loss in the pursuit of justice.

Noteworthy among our advocates is someone else who was twice blessed, someone whose surname bears striking resemblance to King's monogram, Harvey Bernard Milk. Paul Russell wrote in the 1995 book, [The Gay 100: A Rank of the Most Influential Gay Men and Lesbians](#), "Harvey Milk was the Martin Luther King, Jr. of the movement for gay and lesbian civil rights, and his martyrdom was a painful reminder of how long and difficult the journey to freedom would be, the tireless example of his heroic life was an empowering spur to action" (p 97). It is entirely fitting that this man is now the subject of a much acclaimed Hollywood film.

Just as Obama has inspired a nation with hope for a brighter future so did Milk. In his famous "Hope Speech," he emphasized the importance of making a better world for gay youth. "And the young gay people in the Altoona, Pennsylvanias and the Richmond, Minnesotas who are coming out and hear Anita Bryant in television and her story. The only thing they have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be all right. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us'es, the us'es will give up. And if you help elect to the central committee and other offices, more gay people, that gives a green light to all who feel disenfranchised, a green light to



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move forward. It means hope to a nation that has given up, because if a gay person makes it, the doors are open to everyone.” [2]

So as we embark on this next step in the journey let us remember that as Jews we are instructed “Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live”. (Deut. 16:20). Let us make every effort toward the realization of the Promised Land envisioned by Dr. King. Let us emulate the fortitude of Hillary Rodham Clinton, who put “18,000,000 cracks in the glass ceiling” (the approximate number of votes she received in the primaries) during her Presidential run and will serve as our next Secretary of State. Let us live according to the challenge of our 44th President, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” [Barack Obama, campaign speech, February 5, 2008]

References

[1] “Mourn the losses, because they are many; but celebrate the victories, because they are few.” Sharon Gless as Debbie Novotny, *Queer as Folk*, Season 3 Finale.

[2] Shilts, Randy. *The Mayor of Castro Street: the Life & Times of Harvey Milk*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982. p. 363.



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