

Dear Chavraya,

Today is the fortieth *yahrzeit* of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., *Zecher Tzadik Livracha/May the Memory of the Righteous be for a Blessing*. Forty years evokes images of the desert journey nearing its fulfillment, the moment of coming so close, of being able to look out and see the Promised Land in the distance. As our teacher Moses did not enter the Land, neither did our teacher Martin. The night before his death in Memphis, Tennessee, there to support striking sanitation workers, he said with all the power of his tired, prophetic voice, "I've been to the mountain top.... And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"

All who were in this world on that night forty years ago, and were aware enough to remember will remember. I was a senior in high school and was driving home from a school band rehearsal, when I heard the news on the radio. I screamed, nearly crashing the car as I pulled to the side of the road. Only four years earlier, the year following my Bar Mitzvah, I had stood on Boston Common and heard Martin Luther King in person, standing in awe but a short distance from him. It is an image etched forever in my memory. It is not enough to remember. A *yahrzeit* reminds us of that. When we say, "May his or her memory be a blessing," then in truth we are making a promise to be that blessing.

This week's Torah portion is *Parashat Tazria*, a word derived from "seed," referring at the outset of the portion to the conceiving of a child. Beginning from a place of awe in response to birth, the portion is concerned primarily with leprosy. So often misunderstood, the cry of the leper is not to be a warning to others to keep their distance for their own safety, rather it is meant to be a calling out so that others will hear the leper's pain and thereby pray for compassion and healing, offering their own tears as comfort, crying with the afflicted. In the awe that attends to the birth of every child and in the hope that springs with each new life, there is a challenge to make of this world a place where every child can grow in freedom and safety. The pure cry of new life and the cry of the afflicted mingle as one.

This Shabbos is also about journeys. A connection is made in the Talmud between the one who cries out and a verse from Isaiah; *Solu, solu, panu darech/blaze a trail, carve a path, prepare the way....* This week is *Shabbat HaChodesh/Shabbat of the month*, the last of the four special Shabbatot that bring us to the month of *Nisan*, the month of *Pesach*, of liberation. On *Rosh Chodesh Nisan*, people from all around the Land of Israel would begin the journey to Jerusalem to be there for the holiday. This Shabbat is the stepping off point, a reminder to take the first steps.

From this Shabbos we begin to envision the way from slavery to freedom. The desert journey never really ended, twisting and winding its way forward until injustice and violence are left behind and the beautiful vista of the Promised Land opens before us. Martin Luther King continues to guide and to challenge. Too often his message is sanitized. Though we will not likely see the Promised Land, if we would blaze the trail and carve a path for our children's children's

children to get there, then we need to hear the whole message. We need to hear the righteous anger, and the deep pain, the searing indictment of a sick America, of war, of economic disparity. Then we can hear more fully the message of healing.

You can go to this link and hear the words that Rev. King spoke that night in Memphis.

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

“It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today.”

May we be in a different place tomorrow, the whole world filled with Shabbos. May his memory be a blessing....

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor