

*By Rabbi Marc Aaron Kline and Reverend Leo Woodberry*

Every year we gather to celebrate the life and accomplishments of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King on his birthday. We speak of his "Dream" of a world where we protect each other's dignity because we share the same divine parent and not just the same religion, skin color, language or gender. We would be remiss if we did not notice that his dream is far from realized. We would further be remiss if we did not notice that one of the greatest obstacles in the way of fulfilling his dream is the way in which we have forgotten the rest of his speech that day in Washington, D.C. He dreamt of a day when "the sons and daughters of slaves and former slave masters ..." would co-exist in harmony and with dignity. His dream was not limited to racial equality. His dream was far more encompassing. As he marched for racial justice, he marched against the proliferation of war. His was not a message for African Americans, nor was it a call to Christians. He taught that God was the God for all people of all colors and all faiths. He prayed for peace and for justice for all people, of all nations, on all fronts. That people use him exclusively as a Christian or an African American serves only to diminish the magnitude of this man's prophecy and ignore history. This Minister of the gospel understood all too well that God was not limited to the protection and love of one religion or one race.

Yesterday, it was Vietnam, today it is the Middle East, the Philippines, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Yesterday, there were lunch counters for white and for colored, today there are bank standards, club memberships, and educational / economic opportunities for the haves and have nots. Yesterday, the nation feared the Red Scare while today, Democrats fear

the Republican scare and Republicans rail against the Democratic illegitimacy. Yesterday, the doors were opening for equal opportunity, and today our government is calling to do away with the tools that provided that access. The world today is just as filled with strife, as it was when Dr. King lived and struggled for the cause of peace and justice. In the 1960's, African Americans cried out about discrimination and the abortion of human rights. Today we hear echoes of the same cries from Arab-Americans and from Hispanic-Americans. In the current race for the office of President of the United States, the use of "race" as a campaign tool has threatened to split the country.

How much are we truly committed to the dream? Dr. King said in his time that we were facing a triple revolution: a revolution in human rights, technology, and weaponry. How have we honored the Dr. King's call to protect and proliferate the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Sometimes we just do not pay attention. When biological and chemical weapons fill the storerooms and arsenals of democratic nations (including our own) as well as terrorist labs, how committed are we to the dream? We live in a world where bank accounts of the wealthy and the rolls of the impoverished are growing at a similar pace. We have become so focused on security from outside terrorism that we have look past the abusive corporations that have pillaged the security of people's savings and futures. The bomb takes lives of loved ones. The economic terrorism of an abusive corporate world has destroyed more lives and communities than any suicide bomb. Every time we forget that fulfilling the dream is rooted in the very real and intentional work of undoing the sense of privilege that has found its way into every nook and cranny of our American culture, we have to question where Dr. King's message went awry. And

every time that Dr. King's words are used to support the elevation of one people, even a minority people, over another, we have missed the point that there can never be peace when one wins at the expense of another's loss. Racism is real. Reverse racism is also real. And the voices that proliferate this divide, who profit and become more powerful as a result of this divide rule the airwaves with talk shows that are "too liberal" or "too conservative," but always divisive. Whether it is the inflammatory sermon of clergy or the brow beating of a candidate with the assessment that his candidacy is only about his race. America does not win. We do not win. This is not a zero sum game that for us to prosper someone else has to lose, and yet, we treat our country as though our success must be rooted in our neighbor's failure. So long as our success is rooted in anything other than our hard work for the betterment of our lives and our community, so long as it is enough to beat the next person such that growth need not be an issue on our table, so long as our sphere of concern relegates a concern for ethics and justice to a position secondary to our prosperity, we have not fulfilled Dr. King's dream.

We must, as Dr. King said, become a people oriented society and not a thing oriented society. Our responsibility to God was to turn from our idolatrous attraction to things that occupy space to souls that occupy eternity. People work hard and deserve to enjoy the benefit of their labor and investment. But, that blessing comes with responsibilities. All of the major religions of the world teach that we have an obligation to make sure that the doorway to opportunity opens equally for all people. We must carry the standard for the same prophetic actions that Dr. King did, so that ministries rooted in righteousness become less concerned with the budgetary profit and more concerned with the teaching of prophecy; less

about “just us” and more concerned with the healing power of justice. As people, we cannot wait for plants to close to pray for better times. We cannot wait to see the child living in the streets before we plan for sheltering the homeless. We cannot wait until there is an epidemic before worrying about providing competent medical care. Instead, we should pray with our feet and every fiber of our being to see that new jobs are created that provide a living -- and not just minimum wage, that communities have doctors, and that people have access not to makeshift housing, but to houses that be made into homes. And, we should not wait until epidemics like crack, domestic violence, gang violence, and imprisonment ravage our future. We must start programs to waylay those social circumstances that prey on God’s children – all of God’s children regardless of color, religion, creed, orientation, or even citizenship. If people live within our borders, then only in protecting their future can we secure our own. As President Kennedy said, “If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.”

So on this 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day when the assassin took Dr. King’s life, when the living words of the prophet became his legacy, on the day his earthly voice was silenced, we call on the community to return to the actual teachings that Dr. King left to us. We call on the community to move past participation in perfunctory events where speeches are heard detailing what we want Dr. King to have said. To make the “Dream” come true, we must create a clear plan of and clarion call to action to heal our world. We must examine the historical and humane gains envisioned by Dr. King, not as a measure of our past, but as a living template for our everyday struggles, and as a blue print for our future. It is not until we can free each other from the fear of abuse, that we can be free. It is not until

we can free people from the fear of living in a society where a broken system maintains itself because it favors those who hold power, that anyone of us can be free. So long as we fear each other, we cannot be free. Only when we can make estranged fathers responsible for the children they father, give those on welfare motivation to live productive lives, turn the hearts of those who are privileged to the rest of God's children who deserve privilege – only then can we be free. We may not all be at fault, but as long as we can look at someone, feel pain for their plight – and then walk away, all of us are responsible. Only when hope is brought to the hearts of those of every color, religion or nationality who will inherit this world tomorrow can we, as one people, emerge in freedom and sing out in increasing ways, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"