

Tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. - January 15, 1990

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

If anyone else had, some twenty-five or thirty years ago, gone to Washington, shouting and singing "I have a dream," he would have been sent to a psychiatrist. But when Martin Luther King said those words, the entire country listened and, indeed, the entire civilized world shared in his dream.

I have met Dr. King only once, thanks to a mutual friend, who was a very dear friend of his and mine--Abraham Joshua Heschel. In fact, it happened, I think, a week before the assassination. Dr. King came to address a conference, a rabbinic conference, a rabbinical assembly, and Dr. Heschel wanted me to meet him--and we met. I was naturally profoundly impressed by the man: by his depth, by his sense of humor, and by the intensity of his commitments.

Now what does the memory of Dr. King mean to this generation? First of all it means: that courage is rewarded. Often we think of the influence of one man and the way he or she acts upon history. And we are, of course, admiring such a person. To take history on one's shoulders and say I am going to redirect it--that takes courage. And, in moments of grace, the reward is there as well.

Martin Luther King was not really alone. Whenever we saw him, he was surrounded by friends and allies and accomplices. Except that great men are always alone. In the midst of crowds he must have realized that there is so much to do and still so much to accomplish. Whatever he would try to do would never be enough. But what he managed to do is to inspire all those around him. An inspired person is he or she who inspires others. And, indeed, those of us who are old enough to remember that day--the march to Washington--cannot but feel gratified. It was a privilege for any human being to be alive that day.

What was the message? What was the dream? Very simple: that no person ought ever to be humiliated. The greatest sin in the world is humiliation. Every human being--whatever his or her color, ethnic origin, social class, religion--every human being is sovereign, not only independent but sovereign. We carry a

certain sovereignty in us; and that sovereignty cannot be mutilated nor can it ever--nor *must* it ever be--muted.

I come from a tradition that has seen in humiliation a crime as serious as murder. The Talmud says it explicitly: to humiliate another human being, for whatever reason, is to commit murder. I come from a tradition--which I know now is your tradition as well, my friends from the black community--a tradition that is against slavery, not only physical but also spiritual slavery.

After Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, the next commandment is against slavery. And that commandment is extraordinary, because it says, not only am I not supposed to own slaves, but I am not supposed to be a slave. And the slave who chooses slavery is to be punished. For I am free, but I am not free to give up my freedom.

Racism of course preaches the opposite. Racism is ugly; racism is stupid; and unfortunately racism is contagious. What we have learned from those days when that magnificent struggle was going on in the United States--a struggle for the soul of our nation, a struggle for the heart of our history--when that struggle was going on I was thinking, as many of us did, that those who hate, hate everybody. Those who hate the blacks, hate the Jews--and the other way around. Those who hate a minority, hate all minorities--and end up hating themselves. And against that hatred I wonder: what could be the cure?

We live now in extraordinary times. The acceleration of history has begun, and who would have imagined six months ago that we would be witnessing events in Romania and East Germany, Hungary, now Bulgaria. History is running very fast; it is running towards the end of the century, which is also the end of the millennium. Occasionally irrational forces may take hold of history, and then we pay the price. If we have the courage, and the lucidity, and the generosity of being a disciple in the field of human rights of Martin Luther King, we may prevent the irrational forces from dominating history. And then we may move humankind in a direction of nobility.

What we have seen in our own land was also very fast. The pace was rapid. I can tell you I--as an immigrant here, as a Jew who has seen certain events in his life--I am proud of our country and of our nation. Not only that we have changed the laws so quickly (too late, 200 years too late), but we have changed the laws, as you have mentioned, under Lyndon Johnson. But we have

also changed the mentality. Now racism is not fashionable anymore.

I remember when I came to the United States. I was then a journalist--I was going to say young journalist, but I wasn't that young--and I went through the South, and I can tell you for the first time in my life I felt shame. I never felt ashamed as a Jew. Even when we were victims I did not feel shame. But I felt ashamed in the South, ashamed of being white. What I have seen there the way the law was illegal: that black persons, simply because of their color, couldn't enter the bus. And it was the law of the land. I couldn't sleep at night. I felt the same thing when I went to South Africa to fight in South Africa against apartheid. I couldn't take it; I felt ashamed of my color, of my white color.

But today in our land things have changed. Oh, I know, I agree with you: the battle is not over. Sixty-four racist and anti-semitic groups ravage this land; I know that white supremacists do have an appeal, a strange perverse appeal among young people. It's ugly, it's vicious.

I know that even in our own city, here and there, even on campuses--and like you, I'm a teacher--even on campuses, we have racist incidents, anti-black incidents or then anti-hispanic incidents or anti-Jewish incidents. But they belong to minorities. Generally, the mentality has changed; generally we saw in our black brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters.

I cannot in this place where I have been more than a guest for 23 years, I cannot not end with a legend. The legend is that two men met, one was black and one was white, in a small village. But they became very close friends. And yet they never looked into a mirror. So the black person was convinced that everyone is white, and so was he; the white person was convinced that everyone is black, and so was he. And the moral of the story is: don't look into mirrors. Thank you.