

Vaera

In the book that bears his name, the prophet Amos declares, “To me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians – declares the Lord. True I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir” (9:7). Like many verses from the books of the Prophets, knowing what they mean can be difficult

even when you read them in context. That is what makes them open to innovative applications. This verse has always called out to me. I wanted to share it with you today because this week we marked Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Dr. King quoted extensively in his speeches from the Book of Amos. The most famous of his quotations is chapter five, verse twenty four: “But let

justice well up like water, righteousness like
an unfailing stream.”

Every day since his assassination on
April 4, 1968 has been an opportunity to
miss him and lament the loss of perhaps the
greatest American of the twentieth century.

The Jewish community, in particular, has
reason to grieve his death since it marked a

turning point in Black-Jewish relations

whose effects continue to this day.

As we read during these weeks about Moses's confrontation with Pharaoh, the memory of Dr. King becomes stronger in our minds. We must wonder how Moses was able to stand before the most powerful man in the world – a man who, in fact, was considered God in Egypt – and demand his

people's freedom. Even trying to imagine the fear Moses must have had to overcome is stupefying.

When King defied the state governments of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, he too was standing up to a Pharonic like power, whose tyranny was notorious. Those of us who watched and read about him doing experienced the awe first hand that a man

who was considered by many to not be a man at all, was able to stand before that overwhelming power and not be overawed.

After the Civil War, radical Republicans in the North tried to impose Reconstruction on the defeated Southern states. As the name implies, Reconstruction's aim was to completely remake these states. The first impeachment in American history – of

President Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor – occurred because the radical Republicans primarily from Massachusetts believed Johnson was unwilling to implement Reconstruction.

In one of the most contested elections in American history – one in which neither candidate could secure enough votes from the electoral college to declare victory – the

compromise solution brought Rutherford B. Hayes into the presidency, and Hayes effectively ended the period of Reconstruction.

What followed was reconciliation between North and South. The Civil War caused more deaths than any other war the United States had fought, and northerners and southerners were eager to patch up their

conflict. African Americans lost out in this arrangement because not only did Reconstruction end but less than twenty years later, the Supreme Court decided in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that segregation was legal.

All this history is relevant to understanding Dr. King and what he tried to achieve during the 1950s and 1960s in

American society. Although most of his work – especially early on – was in the South, the North’s complicity in segregation meant that when Dr. King challenged Jim Crow segregation laws, he was actually going up against the entire United States government. Certainly, that is as formidable as Pharaoh.

We actually do know how Dr. King found the wherewithal to stand up to the United States government; he was a man of extraordinary faith. That's a fact that has been lost track of in our increasingly secular society. King was a man deeply grounded in the Bible – the Tanakh – and the relationship he had with God was at the forefront of his life and his life's work. King, of course, did

not appear spontaneously. He was, in a sense, a product of the teachings and efforts of the Black Church, which had existed since before slavery but became a central institution post-Civil War for African Americans.

I've always had a fascination with the Black Church, and admittedly, one of the factors that played a role in my personal

religious transformation. When I was growing up secular, the example of African Americans' seemingly unwavering faith in God was perhaps the most important reason, I never succumbed to atheism. I figured that if a people that had been so badly harmed could affirm a Creator, then that conviction could not be dismissed out of hand. Dr. King was exceptional and a religious genius, but

he was also a product of more than a century of faith, worship, and study by African Americans through the Church for more than a century.

I'll pause for a moment. Especially nowadays, speaking about another people's history is particularly sensitive. No one in this congregation, including myself, knows what the experience of being African

American in our society is like. I've studied American history and African American history in particular, however, and I also think that this aspect of political correctness is excessive and even harmful. I therefore acknowledge the challenge of relating a history one hasn't lived, but that isn't going to prevent me from speaking on this topic.

As is apparent, this topic is quite large.

Starting with Dr. King, I've reviewed

American history, referenced Black-Jewish

relations, and discussed the Black Church.

Given current events, returning to Black-

Jewish relations is imperative. The Black-

Jewish alliance was famous for its symbiosis

and effectiveness. Jews were instrumental in

founding the NAACP, which led the effort

to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1954 in
the case *Brown v. The Board of Education*.

Furthermore, Jews provided financial
assistance and worked on the ground
throughout the South to promote the effort
to end segregation. That harmony and
collaboration started to fray before 1968, but
certainly after 1968, Black-Jewish relations

began to transform and transform for the worse.

African American leaders outside the Church – namely in the Black Power movement and Nation of Islam – rejected the alliance and turned their ire against not only American Jews but also Israel. I don't mean to imply that the faltering in Black-Jewish relations was a one-sided affair. The

abandonment of the cities for the suburbs
like the one we live in in Jericho during the
50s, 60s, and 70s dissolved the neighborly
contact that was integral to the Black-Jewish
alliance. Note, however, that I don't see
symmetry between intentionally antisemitic
rhetoric and seeking a better life in the
suburbs.

What was danced around over the last month following the assault at the Kosher supermarket in Jersey City, the high incidence of attacks on Jews on the streets of Brooklyn and Manhattan in December, and the attempted massacre in Monsey is that the perpetrators were African Americans. Many media outlets and even American Jewish leaders were so intent on holding to the

narrative that President Trump had stoked hatred in society causing white supremacists to attack Jews, as one did in Pittsburgh, that they couldn't address this basic fact. That's not to say that the President hasn't been a contributor to the current vitriolic political climate, but the rise of violent antisemitism cannot be laid squarely at his feet.

At these moments, more than any others,
I yearn for Dr. King. King treasured and
cultivated the alliance with American Jews.
He understood the uniqueness and
importance of Zionism and Israel. That's
why I said at the beginning of my sermon
that each day since April 4, 1968 is an
opportunity to mourn King's passing.

More than anything, the Torah teaches hope and defies despair, so if I've taken you too close to despair with my words this morning, allow me to right the ship. To do that, I return to the verse in Amos. I'll repeat it: "To me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians – declares the Lord. True I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the

Arameans from Kir” (9:7). To me, what this verse means is that God has covenanted with other peoples. He has redeemed other peoples, not only the Jews from Egypt.

While Amos does not say in this verse that the Ethiopians specifically were redeemed, the statement “O Israelites you are just like the Ethiopians” always rings for me. Even in antiquity before the pseudo-scientific

construct of race, humans had awareness of skin color, and the Ethiopians were a people of color – to use our contemporary parlance. When I think of “the Ethiopians,” I think of African Americans, who like the Philistines and Arameans in the verse, were liberated from slavery. I say here that African Americans are our sister people. We are forever bonded to them because like us, they

covenanted with the God of Israel and were redeemed from slavery.

How can the assertion that African Americans are our sister people be squared with the accurate assessment that the Black-Jewish is undeniably frayed?

In the aftermath of the recent incidents, many African American leaders asserted that the African American community as a

whole is not antisemitic, and this I believe is true. A vocal and assertive minority, however, is. That is what makes the work of affirming that we are sister peoples difficult. With those African Americans who clearly affirm the legacy of the Black Church and the leadership of Dr. King, we will always be bonded.

Nothing is straightforward in the current political environment. I think about what Ben Gurion said during World War II. “We must fight in the war as if there is no White Paper, and fight against the White Paper as if there is no war.” As that applies here, we should never forget what bonds us to the African American community no matter how frayed relations may seem. But we also

must be forthright in denouncing movements – like the Black Israelites and the Nation of Islam – that continue to spew antisemitic vitriol.

I assure you that Dr. King would stand by us as we pursue this dual track. His friendship defined the best of what that alliance can be, and we will always honor his legacy.