

Rabbi Lewis' Message for February, 2013

Even when you think you know what to expect, it is still somewhat shocking to walk around the corner in Memphis and be confronted by the Lorraine Motel. It looks just like it looked in the 1968 newspaper photos. Up on the second floor balcony, a life preserver marks the spot where Dr. Martin Luther King was shot. As you stand in that place, you can turn around and look back through a glassed-in wall into the motel room where King and his colleagues had been chatting moments before his death. The room is preserved exactly as it had been left. After Dr. King's assassination, the Lorraine Motel fell into a steep decline but eventually was preserved and designated an historic site. The site became the home of the [National Civil Rights Museum](#).

I imagine I would have felt just as moved if I had gone to the National Civil Rights Museum at some other time, but it just so happened that I was there a few days before Martin Luther King's birthday. I hadn't been to Memphis since the mid-1980s; the Museum didn't open until 1991. I had forgotten so much of the history of the Civil Rights Movement in our country. We watched footage of the sanitation workers strike including the footage of Dr. King's final speech. His final words made me shiver. As others have noted, they seemed to foretell what would happen to him the next day:

And then I got to Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't really matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. 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. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Dr. King paid for his devotion to justice with his life. If ever you can say that one person made a difference, you can make the case for Dr. Martin Luther King. While it is true that the world is not yet a just place, much has changed for the good in the intervening years. Could Dr. King have dreamed that 45 years later we would inaugurate an African American President for a second term on a day named for Dr. King himself?

Dr. King spoke straight out of our biblical prophetic tradition in his defense of justice for all people. President Obama referenced this same biblical tradition this week when

he reiterated the prophetic stand, “For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they have never been self-executing; that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth.” We believe we are God’s partners in bringing freedom to all humankind. As we are told by the rabbis in Pirke Avot: “*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v’lo atah ben horin l’hibatel mimena*. It is not your job to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from beginning.” Dr. King’s legacy to us reminds us of our own teachings.

One person can make a difference - or perhaps better said - each person must make a difference.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis