

D'var Torah Parshat Yitro Exodus 18:1–20:23
delivered January 18, 2014
by David Stone
in honor of Martin Luther King Jr's birthday

"The entire people responded together and said, 'Everything that Hashem has spoken we will do!'" [1] With these words from today's parsha, Yitro, we commit ourselves collectively to the same covenant to which our patriarchs and matriarchs committed themselves individually. Just a few verses off, and also in today's parsha, is the revelation at Sinai -- the culmination of that covenant -- and the Ten Commandments. And since today we are remembering and celebrating the life and the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr, I thought we might look at one of those commandments, the ninth one, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" [2] and take a look at what it means to bear witness.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." In its strictest sense, of course, this means not to commit perjury. It has been expanded to prohibit slander and lying in general. What I'd like to look here is, can this commandment be violated not only by *co*mission but also by *o*mission? Not only by what we do but also by what we do *not* do? Are we commanded not only not to bear false witness and thus *cause* injustice, but also to bear *true* witness when this will *prevent* injustice?

Torah tells us that we are. Vayikra/Leviticus 5:1 says that if a person is called upon to testify and refuses to do so, he is liable to punishment. From this the Rambam, in his compilation of the 613 mitzvot, listed as one of them that anyone who knows evidence must testify in court. [3] The Sefer Hachinuch, the Book of Education, published in 13th-century Spain, which also discusses the 613 mitzvot, says that one who fails to testify when he has evidence is comparable to one who stands idly by the blood of his neighbor. [4]

From this we see that the Ninth Commandment not to bear false witness does also require us to bear true witness when doing so would prevent injustice. This shows us how to bear true witness when it has to do with one individual. But again, since today we are remembering Rev King, we must ask: how do we bear true witness in the social sphere, on matters which concern not just one individual but society as a whole?

Several of the prophets of the 8th and 7th centuries BCE warned the people of the kingdom of Judah of the impending destruction of the Temple of Solomon and the subsequent Babylonian exile and told why this would come to pass. Jeremiah said it was because "among my people are found wicked men ... they are become great, and waxen rich; they plead not the cause of the fatherless and the right of the needy do they not judge." [5] Isaiah said it was because of "them that decree unrighteous decrees, and the writers who write iniquity; to turn aside the needy from judgment and take away the right of the poor of my people, that widows may be their spoil, and they make the fatherless their prey." [6] Ezekiel said it was because "the people of the land have used oppression, and exercise robbery, and have wronged the poor and the needy and have oppressed the stranger." [7]

Today we remember and celebrate the life and the legacy of Rev Martin Luther King Jr -- someone whose philosophy of social action and whose strategies of social action were both rooted in a belief in the irrepressible power of bearing true witness, that oppressed people who are willing to testify to their oppression and to defy the system of oppression, no matter what the cost to themselves, could bear true witness to the oppressor, could force the oppressor no longer to look away but to see the full force of the horrors they were perpetrating, and could also bear true witness to a nation which would take action against it.

In 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama, local civil rights leaders invited Rev King to come to their city to organize for desegregation of public facilities and greater employment opportunities for African Americans. An associate of Rev King said that "if we mounted a strong nonviolent movement, the opposition would surely do something to attract the media, and in turn induce national sympathy to the everyday segregated circumstance of a person living in the Deep South." [8]

Birmingham police responded to peaceful protestors by turning on them the city's fire hoses, set at a level that would peel bark from trees and separate bricks from mortar. The force of the water pushed demonstrators over the tops of cars and down the street. When bystanders protested, police set German shepherd dogs on them. A television reporter said that no military action he had witnessed had ever frightened or disturbed him as much as what he saw in Birmingham that day. Life magazine published a photo of teenagers being hit by water from the hoses entitled "They fight a fire that won't go out." [9] President Kennedy said the scenes made him "sick" [10] and said they were "so much more eloquent ... than ... any number of explanatory words." [11] Senator Wayne Morse compared Birmingham to South Africa under apartheid. [12] Senator Jacob Javits asked Congress to pass a civil rights bill. [13] The following year saw the passage of the Civil Rights

Act of 1964, and the year after that, the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Through their protest, and the violence of their oppressors, the demonstrators had borne true witness to the nation of the system of racial segregation and oppression in a way which changed history.

Finally, for us here today, we are faced with the question, how do we *as Jews* bear true witness? Today's parsha says that we are to be "a nation of priests and a holy people." In other words, a chosen people. For many of us of a more liberal or progressive outlook -- certainly for us in this community, where we pray for peace not only "aleinu v'al kol yisrael" but "v'al kol yoshvey teyvel" [14], this can be problematic. As always, I think it's all in the interpretation. This can be seen in a debilitating, chauvinistic way, which says that we are morally superior to other people. But it can also be interpreted in a broader, more affirming way, which says that bearing true witness is part of our covenant, or as Rabbi Marcia once said to me, that "we are the only people with a mission statement."

Bearing true witness need not be public or dramatic. We bear true witness when we demonstrate or write a letter to the editor. We bear true witness when we give of ourselves as our friend Gayle and her colleagues in the Power Coalition. But we also bear true witness when we hear a racist joke and gently and privately explain to the person who told it why it is wrong. And we can bear true witness not only to others but to ourselves. We do this when we give tzedakah in the right spirit. We do it when we hold ourselves to our own highest standard of respect for those who are different from us, whether in the area of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religious or political views, or anything else. We can bear true witness in as many ways as there are for us to be present in the world as human beings.

Just ten days before he was killed, Rev King addressed the convention of the Rabbinical Assembly, the international organization of Conservative rabbis. There he was introduced by his friend and associate, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. As Rabbi Heschel then said, "Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision, and a way. I call upon every Jew to harken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way." [15]

Footnotes:

[1] Exodus 19:8

[2] Exodus 20:13

[3] http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/756399/jewish/The-613-Commandments.htm [number 570]

[4] Barbara Binder Kadden and Bruce Kadden, "Teaching Mitzvot: Concepts, Values, and Activities" [Denver, Colorado: A.R.E. Publishing, Inc, 2003], p. 107

[5] Jeremiah 5:26, 28

[6] Isaiah 10:1-2

[7] Ezekiel 22:29

[8] <https://www.pccc.edu/parley/articles/letter-birmingham-jail-cause>

[9] <http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2010/berger-fixing-images>

[10] <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/the-day-president-kennedy-embraced-civil-rights-and-the-story-behind-it/276749>

[11] http://www.whitehousehistory.org/whha_classroom/classroom_9-12-pressure-march.html

[12] http://www.bhamwiki.com/w/Police_dogs_and_firehoses

[13] http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/civil_rights/CivilRightsCloture_FeaturedBio.htm - p. 3

[14] "A Siddur for Shabbat Morning, compiled and edited by Rabbi Marcia Prager," p. 58 - <http://marciaprager.com/content/pnai-or-shabbat-morning-siddur>

[15] <https://beaconhebrewalliance.org/content/king-and-heschel>