**THE TALMUD**

**OF THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

*The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. was a 20th century orator, writer, prophet and national civil and human rights leader who spoke truth to power, inspiring his listeners to work for racial justice and social change. His birthday is now a national U.S. holiday, often celebrated with humanitarian service.*

*The Talmud is one of the most sacred texts in Jewish tradition. Initially an oral tradition, it was committed to writing and finally canonized in the sixth century. It was designed so that sacred text was in the center of the page and commentaries surrounded it. These commentaries explained, asked questions, resolved contradictions and added information; they were understood to be in active conversation with the text.*

*We have borrowed from this format\*, using as our text a critical sermon, delivered by Dr. King at New York’s Riverside Church in April, 1967, a year before his assassination. This sermon presents Dr. King’s opposition to United States involvement in the Vietnam war, but constitutes also a much broader critique of American values, decrying specifically the evils of racism, militarism and materialism. It argues strongly for systemic change, urging that people must work against these evils.*

*We see King’s sermon as our sacred text, as timely today as it was 52 years ago. We have placed excerpts from this speech in the center of the following pages and surrounded them with ancient and contemporary Jewish text so that the writings are speaking to each other, creating a conversation that spans several millennia but could and should be happening today.*

*Dr. King’s vision of social justice and his exhortations for involvement and the Jewish arguments for individual responsibility together speak to the importance of civic and community engagement. They demonstrate clearly how Jewish it is for us to be working together as activists and advocates for the repair of the world.*

*We hope that people will use these texts to engage in further conversations of their own regarding the situations in which they find themselves, paying particular attention to the ways in which* ***Dr. King might best be honored*** *not only by service to others but by activism for social change.*

*\*We are indebted to the national Hillel organization for its previous use of this format when presenting another King speech.*

***The requirement for broad involvement in the world in order to change our nation’s values, to fight the forces that are destroying us and to work for social change on a systemic level***

Our greatest defense is to take offensive action in behalf of justice. We must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity, and injustice.

If we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values, must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society.

When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries.

Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments.

The image of America will never again be the image of revolution, freedom, and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism.

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

Somehow this madness must cease. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities.

True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

*“May we be strong and have courage to be bold in our action and deep in our compassion; to discern when we must listen and when we must act; to uproot bigotry, misogyny, racism, discrimination and violence in all its forms; to celebrate the many faces of God reflected in the wondrous diversity of humanity; to welcome the stranger and the immigrant and to honor the gifts of those who seek refuge and possibility here. As they have since this nation was born, let justice well up like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”* A Prayer for Our Country, Rabbi Ayelet Cohen

*“Rabbi Eliezer said: One who performs acts of righteousness and justice is greater than one who brings sacrifices to the Temple.”* Proverbs 21:3

*“Rabbi Shimon the son of Gamliel said: The world stands on three things: on justice, on truth and on peace. As it is written: Judge with truth justice and peace within your gates.”* Zachariah 8

*“Justice, justice thou shall pursue.”* Deuteronomy 16:20

*“Is such the fast I desire – a day for men to starve their bodies? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of lawlessness; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke.”* Isaiah 58:5-7

*“End it [poverty], so that there will be no one destitute among you when Adonoy will surely bless you in the land that Adonoy, your God, is giving you as territory to inherit.”* Deuteronomy 15:4

*“If you can stop your household from committing a sin, but do not, you are held responsible for the sins of your household. If you can stop the people of your city from sinning, but do not, you are held responsible for the sins of the city. If you can stop the whole world from sinning, and do not, you are held responsible for the sins of the whole world “* Shabbat 54b

“*Do not stand idly by while your neighbor’s blood is shed.”* Leviticus 19:16

*“Once again, the tradition reflects the complexity of human existence. We should not hate. We should reprove both those who hurt us and those who bring hurt to the world. We are not only to reprove someone who has wronged us but also those who wrong anybody. We move from a negative commandment, do not gossip, to a positive commandment calling for our involvement in the life of the community. In the face of injustice or wrongdoing, we are told not to stand idly by. We must actively attempt to better the situation.”* Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, The Book of Life

*“There is immense* [*silent*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Silent)[*agony*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Agony) *in the* [*world*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/World)*, and the* [*task*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Task) *of man is to be a* [*voice*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Voice) *for the plundered* [*poor*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Poor)*, to prevent the desecration of the* [*soul*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Soul) *and the violation of our* [*dream*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Dream) *of* [*honesty*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Honesty)*. The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the* [*prophets*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Prophets)*, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that* [*morally*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Morally) *speaking, there is no limit to the* [*concern*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Concern) *one must feel for the* [*suffering*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Suffering) *of* [*human*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Human) *beings, that* [*indifference*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Indifference) *to* [*evil*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Evil) *is worse than evil itself, that in a* [*free*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Free)[*society*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Society)*, some are* [*guilty*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Guilty)*, but all are* [*responsible*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Responsible) *.*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity

*“Nothing is harder to bear than poverty; for he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the troubles of the world cling and upon whom all the curses in Deuteronomy4 have descended. Our Teachers have said: {Ex. 394} If all troubles were assembled on one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all.”* Shemot Rabba 31:14

***The need to speak up and speak out, to act to make a difference***

I come to this platform tonight to make a passionate plea to my beloved nation, to my fellow Americans. My conscience leaves me no other choice. “A time comes when silence is betrayal."

I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as one who loves America, to the leaders of our own nation.

Men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.

Every man of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest.

This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation; no document can make these humans any less our brothers.

Meanwhile, we in the churches and synagogues have a continuing task. We must continue to raise our voices and our lives. We must be prepared to match actions with words by seeking out every creative method of protest possible.

Social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action.

*“If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge or arbiter, they give stability to the land...But if they sit in their home and say to themselves, ‘What have the affairs of society to do with me? ...Why should I trouble myself with the people’s voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace!’—if one does this, they overthrow the world”* --Midrash Tanḥuma, Mishpatim 2

*"It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either."* Rabbi Tarfon, Pirke Avot 2:21

*“Why were so few voices raised in the ancient world in protest against the ruthlessness of man? Why are human beings so obsequious, ready to kill and ready to die at the call of kings and chieftains? Perhaps it is because they worship might, venerate those who command might, and are convinced that it is by force that man prevails. The splendor and the pride of kings blind the people.”* Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, The idolatry of might

“*If your God loves the poor, for what reason does He not support them Himself? In such a case, say to him: He commands us to act as His agents in sustaining the poor, so that through them we will be credited with the performance of mitzvot and therefore be saved from the judgment of Gehenna. And this is the question that Turnus Rufus the wicked asked Rabbi Akiva: If your God loves the poor, for what reason does He not support them Himself? Rabbi Akiva said to him: He commands us to sustain the poor, so that through them and the charity we give them we will be saved from the judgment of Gehenna.”* Bava Bahtra 10a:2

*“There is immense* [*silent*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Silent)[*agony*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Agony) *in the* [*world*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/World)*, and the* [*task*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Task) *of man is to be a* [*voice*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Voice) *for the plundered* [*poor*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Poor)*, to prevent the desecration of the* [*soul*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Soul) *and the violation of our* [*dream*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Dream) *of* [*honesty*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Honesty)*. The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the* [*prophets*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Prophets)*, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that* [*morally*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Morally) *speaking, there is no limit to the* [*concern*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Concern) *one must feel for the* [*suffering*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Suffering) *of* [*human*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Human) *beings, that* [*indifference*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Indifference) *to* [*evil*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Evil) *is worse than evil itself, that in a* [*free*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Free)[*society*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Society)*, some are* [*guilty*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Guilty)*, but all are* [*responsible*](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Responsible)*.* Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity

*“Whence it is derived that if one sees her neighbor drowning in the sea, being dragged by an animal, or being waylaid by robbers—whence is it derived that she is obligated to save him? From: You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” Sanhedrin 73a in other words American law does not hold a person liable for criminal prosecution for not attempting to save a drowning person. We may be critical of such a person but no law was broken. Judaism, however, commands us to intervene, not to remain silent. We must try to save the drowning person if we can.”*  Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, The Book of Life

*“Tzedakah also saves one other from death: God. If we believe that God acts through human beings and/or that God wants us to repair the world from its brokenness then we need to give tzedakah in order that God or Holiness not “die” from this world.” In this teaching, we are called to make this world a better place on behalf of God. Every poor person is a critique of the notion of God’s goodness. We can make a difference. Tzedakah can fill lives with hope rather than despair.”* Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, The Book of Life

*“We then are told not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor. We move from a negative commandment, do not gossip, to a positive commandment calling for our involvement in the life of the community. In the face of injustice or wrongdoing, we are told not to stand idly by. We must actively attempt to better the situation.”* Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, The Book of Life

***The importance of listening to and learning from others***

The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just, it has poisoned the international atmosphere for so long.

Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.

*“If one has only a small amount of produce, and the poor are many, so that there is not enough to give the statutory amount to each person, one should set the produce before them, and they should divide it among themselves.”* Maimonides, Gifts to the Poor ch.6: 9

***The urgency of now***

We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. We must move past indecision to action.

These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wounds of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. We in the West must support these revolutions.

These are the times for real choices and not false ones. We are at the moment when our lives must be placed on the line if our nation is to survive its own folly.

It is a sad fact that because of comfort, complacency…and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch antirevolutionaries.

Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism.

Our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.

We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate.

We will be marching…and attending rallies without end, unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy.

If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? and if not now, when?” Rabbi Hillel, Pirke Avot 1:14

“The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Telegram to President John F. Kennedy

“It is time for you to act, O LORD; your law is being broken.” Psalms 119:126“ The Talmud reads this as an emergency clause in Scripture. It is the reason given for why we wrote down the oral Torah: it was in danger of being forgotten altogether, and in such a circumstance, it is time to ‘act for the Lord’.”

*“Rabbi Tarfon said: ‘The day is short and the work is much, and the workers are lazy and the reward is great, and the Master of the house is pressing’.”* Pirke Avot 2:16

*“Rabbi Tarfon used to say: ‘It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it’.”* Pirke Avot 2:16

*“Once the time has passed, you may no longer offer a sacrifice.”*Berakhot 26a *Idiomatically, “once the* *time for something has passed, it’s gone; later is too late*. Rabbi David Rosenn.

***Conclusion***

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world.

The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

As that noble bard of yesterday, James Russell Lowell, eloquently stated:

*Once to every man and nation comes a moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth and Falsehood, for the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, God’s new Messiah offering each the bloom or blight,   
And the choice goes by forever ‘twixt that darkness and that light.  
Though the cause of evil prosper, yet ‘tis truth alone is strong  
Though her portions be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong  
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown  
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.*

And if we will only make the right choice, we will be able to transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace. If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when "justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."**5**

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