

Martin Luther King Day

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This weekend, our country remembers and celebrates the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. -- a truly singular figure in American history. In so many ways, Dr. King holds a unique position in our national collective memory. Among all the monuments that stand on the National Mall in Washington, DC, the King Memorial is the only one that honors someone who wasn't a president. Among all the federal holidays that we observe on our national calendar, Dr. King's birthday is the only one that celebrates an individual.

Martin Luther King Day [almost never came to be](#) a federal holiday. The idea was initially voted down in the House of Representatives. But popular support for establishing the holiday grew after organizers commissioned Stevie Wonder to write an anthem for their campaign -- [his now well known song](#): "happy birthday to ya, happy birthday." The holiday was finally established in 1983.

In our national consciousness, MLK Day carries many layers of meaning. For some, it is simply a day off -- when schools, banks, and government offices are closed. For others, it has become a day for community service -- what some organizers have cleverly branded as not a "day off," but rather, a "day on." Indeed, many families in our own community will use the time away from school and work to volunteer this coming Monday, and [help combat hunger](#) in our area by packing boxes of non-perishable food.

And of course, for others, Martin Luther King Day is a time for remembering Dr. King's legacy, and celebrating the successes of the Civil Rights movement. It is often easy to forget just how much our country advanced in the 1950s and '60s. But as a student in WRT's preschool recently reminded me: when Dr. King was a child, people with different color skin had to use different water fountains -- a fact that she learned here in our Early Childhood Center.

In older segments of the American Jewish community, our remembrance of the Civil Rights Era is more sophisticated. We remember the lunch counter sit-ins and the bus boycotts, Brown vs. Board of Education and the March on Washington. And in particular, we recall the specific role that members of the American Jewish community played in advancing the cause of racial justice: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. King; the young Jewish activists Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner who were tragically abducted and killed while helping to register Black Americans to vote; or, of particular pride to Reform Jews, that the part of the text of the Voting Rights Act was drafted in the conference room of our movement's own Religious Action Center in DC.

All of this, we celebrate and remember on Martin Luther King's Birthday. And yet, if we are being honest with ourselves, we know that our commemorations only scratch the surface of Dr. King's legacy. If we take history seriously, we know that Dr. King symbolizes something bigger than our observance of MLK Day might suggest.

Social commentators Jenna Wortham and Wesley Morris help us understand why. They [point out](#) that MLK Day celebrates Dr. King's birthday. But Dr. King's birth is only part of his story. Equally historic was Dr. King's death. King was only 39 when he was killed. As he himself famously [said](#) on the night that he was murdered, his work was not yet complete. Wortham and Morris ask: how might MLK Day look different if it took place not in January, as a celebration of his birth, but rather, in April, as a lamentation of his death? Perhaps in addition to celebrating Dr. King's accomplishments, we might also be better attuned to all of the work that he left unfinished.

A helpful comparison comes from this week's Torah portion. We find ourselves in the thick of the Exodus narrative -- the story of our people's escape from slavery in Egypt. Like Martin Luther King Day, this foundational story of the Jewish people carries with it many layers of meaning.

On its most basic level, it is a story of freedom. After being enslaved in Egypt for more than 400 years, Moses, Miriam, and Aaron lead the Israelites out from the cruel hand of bondage. On this most basic level, the Exodus is a story of the triumph of good over evil -- a story of hope, a reminder that no matter how dire our circumstances, change is always possible.

But there are layers deeper still than this. As any careful student of Hebrew Bible will tell you, the Book of Exodus does not end after the Israelites have been freed from Egypt. They journey onward to Mount Sinai, where they receive the Ten Commandments. They take upon themselves the responsibility to lead ethical, humane lives -- to remember the pain of slavery, and use their lived experience in service of the oppressed. At this next layer, the Exodus narrative is not only about hope, but now is also about obligation.

But there is still a third layer of meaning to the Exodus story -- a layer that might help us to understand what is missing from our observance of Martin Luther King Day, a layer of meaning that, appropriately enough, is found in the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel.¹ Heschel suggests that, for all its success, the Exodus was never fully completed. Yes, the Israelites were freed from bondage, and yes, they accepted the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai -- but even these were only just part of the goal. In order for the Exodus to be completely fulfilled, Heschel teaches, not only the Israelites, but also their Egyptian taskmasters, and even Pharaoh himself needed to go out from Egypt, the house of bondage, and stand at the foot of the mountain. In order for the Exodus to be completely fulfilled, not only the enslaved, but also the enslavers would need to be set free -- set free from their own degradation. In order for the Exodus to be completely fulfilled, Israelite and Egyptian alike must take upon themselves the obligations of Mount Sinai -- the responsibility to live ethical, humane lives. Until that day, the Exodus will forever remain incomplete.

¹ In Heschel's essay "The White Man on Trial," published in *Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*, p. 103: "The tragedy of Pharaoh was the failure to realize that the exodus from slavery could have spelled redemption for both Israel and Egypt. Would that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had joined the Israelites in the desert and together stood at the foot of Sinai!"

So too in our country. We have made tremendous strides in the work of racial justice, even just in the 39 short years of Dr. King's life. And still, the work remains incomplete. There are countless ways in which Black and Brown Americans continue to bear a disproportionate burden in our country -- from income inequality to the spread of the pandemic, issues that members of WRT's Racial Justice Working Group are learning about and fighting against together. And if that weren't enough evidence of the work we have left to do, we need only consider the widely circulated [photographs](#) of the Confederate Flag, and plenty of anti-Semitic paraphernalia as well, being subversively paraded through the halls of the Capitol a week ago Wednesday.

It is good to celebrate all that Dr. King achieved. We should be proud that Heschel marched alongside him. Proud, but not complacent. If they were alive today, King and Heschel without a doubt would be preaching and marching against inequity. We must remember that for all our contemporary adulation of Dr. King, he was, in his own time, despised, and eventually, murdered, for being on the cutting edge of social change. His work was left unfinished.

This Martin Luther King Day, let us not take a day off. Let us not only recall the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. Let us not only celebrate the day of Dr. King's birth, but also lament the day of Dr. King's death -- and remember how much unfinished work he left for us to do. Unless we carry it forward, the Exodus remains incomplete.