

A Prayer for Shabbat Tzedek and MLK Weekend in the Face of Renewed Hatred

By Rabbi Lucy H.F. Dinner, Chair of the Justice and Peace Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Vice Chair of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, and Senior Rabbi at Temple Beth Or in Raleigh, NC

This Sabbath, Jews around the world will complete the reading of the Book of Genesis, hold the Torah high, and pronounce, “*Chazak, Chazak, v’Nitchazek*, from strength to strength, may we be strengthened.” This custom directs us in ways beyond the symbolic. We do not merely close a book of Torah and move on. We glean Torah’s lessons, we realign our lives to its call, and we use that strength to sanctify our lives and to heal our world.

In dark times throughout Jewish history, Jews have been sorely tempted to close the book and move on. Many have indeed succumbed to that lure, hiding behind their indistinguishable, outward characteristics and melting into the population. In this day and time, until recently, some believed that civilization had risen above the venomous hatred that plagued the Jewish past.

As anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim bigotry, racism, and homophobia reemerge as the pop-culture of the day, we again face that juncture where some will yield to the temptation to fade quietly into the background. Yet, the parents of the hundreds of preschool children evacuated at Jewish Community Centers this week due to bomb threats cannot silently pretend that their children’s pristine world has not been shattered. The Neo-Nazis marching against Jews in Whitefish, Montana on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, will not be silent about their hatred. Toting guns, they will parade through town ready to confront any and all who flinch.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged each of us not to flinch in the face of hatred. He taught us to work unwaveringly for that prophetic vision, teaching:

Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles.

Cowardice is submissive surrender to circumstances.

Courage breeds creativity; Cowardice represses fear and is mastered by it.

Cowardice asks the question, is it safe?

Expediency asks the question, is it politic?

Vanity asks the question, is it popular?

But, conscience asks the question, is it right?

- Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Radio Broadcast, KPFA, Santa Rita CA, January 14, 1968.

continues

As we approach this confluence of the challenge "*Chazak, Chazak, v'nitchazek*;" of the commemoration of the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr; and the rise in arrogant acts of violence and blatant oppression; let us pray with all our hearts:

Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek!

Give us strength, our God, from the wellspring of our heritage.

Let the Torah gird us, bidding us to stand strong in the face of the promulgation of hate.

In Whitefish, Montana, link our prayers with those from all faiths and backgrounds to replace:

Vulgarity with human dignity

The narrow-minded with the open hearted

Vanity with right

The cowardliness of submission with the creative power of courage

The destruction of hate with the healing source of love.

May this be our prayer

May this be our strength

May this be the blueprint for our deeds.