



# THE TALMUD OF THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. was a 20<sup>th</sup> 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 canonized in the sixth century. **Its design, which dates back to the 16th century, places sacred text in the center of the page with commentaries surrounding it.** These commentaries explain, ask questions, resolve contradictions, and add information; they are 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 Dr. 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 also by activism for social change.

*\*We are indebted to the national Hillel organization and Rabbi Avi Weinstein 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

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. **Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, A Prayer for Our Country**

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 Adonai will surely bless you in the land that Adonai, 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

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.

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, A Book of Life**

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 Deuteronomy have descended. Our Teachers have said: 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

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 Tanhuma, 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, Pirkei 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. **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. **Bava Bahtra 10a:2**

There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty. The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the Prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible. **Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity***

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.

Whence is it 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, *A 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. **Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, *A Book of Life***

Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" And the LORD answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." **Genesis 18:23**

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING TO AND LEARNING FROM OTHERS

"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**

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from every man, as it is said: "From all who taught me have I gained understanding" **Pirkei Avot 4:1**

Every person that has a special feeling for a certain endeavor will be extremely sensitive when she sees any little thing having to do with that endeavor. For example: when a tailor meets someone he will immediately look at his clothes, the shoemaker—at the shoes, the milliner—at the hat. Similarly a merchant will be very sensitive to any words or actions that will have an impact on his merchandise.

Another type of person would not see or hear any of these things because her heart is not given to inquire and investigate anything from these matters because he has no desire for them...all of this, if one is not engaged in such activities, will not notice them when performed by others. If this is the case, then who "learns from every person," behold, this is a great "merchant," she trades in everything and thus he understands the necessity to learn from the other and thus is called "Wise." **Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, Founder of Kelm Yeshiva**

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.

## THE URGENCY OF NOW

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, Pirkei  
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'." **Gittin 60a**

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.' **Pirkei  
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.'  
**Pirkei Avot 2:16**

A story of now is urgent, it requires  
dropping other things and paying  
attention, it is rooted in the values you  
celebrated in your story of self and us,  
and a contradiction to those values  
that requires action...Leaders who only  
describe a problem, but fail to identify  
actions that those whom they bring  
together can take to address the problem,  
aren't very good leaders. A list of "100  
things you can do to make the world  
better" is a "cop-out." If you are called to  
address a real challenge, a challenge so  
urgent to have motivated us to face it as  
well, then you also have a responsibility  
to invite us to join you in action that has  
some chance of success. A "story of now"  
is not simply a call to make a choice,  
to act—it is a call to "hopeful" action.

**Marshall Ganz, *Telling Your Public Story***

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.

## CONCLUSION BY DR. KING

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."

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