Reflections on a March and the Power of Crossing a Bridge

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A week from now we will celebrate the life of an American hero and Prophet. Can someone tell me his name? (Martin Luther King. Jr.)

What was special about him?



One of the most moving pictures of Dr. King (show on screen) is him walking arm in arm with other religious leaders as they marched… from Selma, Alabama to the State House in Montgomery. There, walking 2 over from Dr. King is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He is considered to be one of the most important religious figures of the 20th century. One of his most famous quotes is, "in a free society, some are guilty but all are responsible." It's a good quote to remember for the times in which we live.

After this march from Selma, Rabbi Heschel was asked by a reporter how he felt. His answer, "I felt like my feel were praying." It felt like my feet were praying. It's a powerful idea, that your feet can pray. But when you're doing something that makes a difference, it's true. It actually feels like your feet are praying.

I had this experience last Sunday. In response to a number of antisemitic attacks against Jews that have taken place in our country over the past year, the Jewish community of New York organized a march from city hall in Manhattan, over the Brooklyn Bridge. I'd like to share a few reflections of this march, because our feet were truly praying

1. We were like the Israelites leaving Egypt. They say that tens of thousands of Israelites left Egypt. This march was also in the ten's of thousands. It is estimated that 25,000 marchers were in attendance. And here's why it also reminded me of leaving Egypt. Because of who was there. Those who left Egypt were young, old, male, female, abled and disabled. And I don't believe that we just streamed out of Egypt. Like that first exodus of our people, this march began with a long shuffle. People stopped to take selfies, to take pictures. We bumped into elderly people who weren't moving as fast. Others stopped to speak to old friends. There were even moments when, like those who, as soon as we stepped out of Egypt began complaining, began complaining on this march. I literally heard this conversation: "Ugh, this is moving so slowly," One woman said to her friend. "I know. It's like molasses. I was expecting a march. I thought I'd be getting my steps in." "You're right. Look, there's a Starbucks. Let's quit this march and go get a couple of lattes." (based on Shemot Rabba 24.1) So they climbed over the barricade and into Starbucks they went. They missed the whole thing. I think that's what it was like leaving Egypt. Some were in awe. Some shuffled. Some stopped for whatever the ancient form of selfies were. Some bumped into other people. Some complained. Some even went back. That's what this march was like.

2. The second thing I realized during this march was the diversity of our jewish people. Beyond age and gender, there was a different type of diversity. There were secular Jews, Reform Jews, Orthodox Jews. There were Jews who were carrying signs from Jewish Voice for Peace - a Jewish pro-Palestinian, anti-occupation group, and Jews who believe in a stronger Israel where we shouldn't give the Palestinians their own homeland or a vote. There were Jews from the Jewish labor movement and I'm sure Jews who support President Trump. There were ashkenazic Jews, sephardic Jews, Jews of color, straight Jews and Gay Jews. We were all there in our diversity because, when it comes to Jew Hatred and stopping hate in general, we are all united. And as I walked and looked at the variety of faces around me, I was reminded of a blessing from the Talmud, a blessing we just started saying here on Shabbat morning, a blessing that we are to say when we are in a large group of Jews - and this was the largest Jewish gathering I have ever been a part of: "blessed are You, the Sage of all secret things, for their thoughts are all different and their faces are all unique." There was so much diversity in this march and it was worth blessing, just as it is always worth blessing our diversity.
3. Finally, just as Martin Luther King began his march from Selma to Montgomery over the Pettis Bridge, I was reminded how a bridge can serve as a beacon of hope, a promise to a better future. As we walked over the Brooklyn

Bridge, i turned to the south and saw the Statue of Liberty standing in New York Harbor. And I thought of all those Jews - our grandparents, our great grandparents, maybe even our great grandparents, who left cities and shtetl's in Europe because they faced persecution and Jew hatred. They came to this country seeking a better future, a future promised them by the freedoms enshrined in our constitution - freedoms we must do all we can to protect for us and for future generations. And many of them settled in the Lower East Side. It was tough to live in those tenements. Many of those who lived as immigrants dreamed of creating a better life for them and for their children. I imagine a Jewish immigrant - maybe one of your great great grandparents - walking out to Delancey street and looking eastward, to a different bridge, the Williamsburg Bridge, serving as a symbol of hope with Brooklyn being the promised land. And here we were, like the Israelites of old who walked through walls of water on their right and on their left, walking to a place of hope and promise, here we were, walking over a bridge that our ancestors looked to as a bridge to hope of a better tomorrow, walking over that self-same bridge to announce loud and clear to all who hate us because we are Jews, all who are threatened by our presence, that we are here in this country and that we are proud to be Jewish and American. That love will conquer hate. That tolerance and understanding can and will overcome narrow-mindedness and bigotry. That is what this march

ultimately taught me, that we are stronger together, that just as this weeks Torah portion is called, “VaYechi,” meaning “and he lived,” that we, the Jewish people, the people of Israel must do everything we can do to combat this scourge of antisemitism so that we can live and thrive - for the memories of those who sailed into New York harbor, for ourselves, for our children, for their children and, let’s be honest, for the future of this country we call home.

4. Over a century ago, a rabbi, a teacher, named Nachman of Bratzlav lived in a small village in Russia. Life was very very hard for him - but that’s a story for another day - but he was able to overcome many difficulties. He found a way to also inspire others through his teachings that come down to us today. For example, he said, “Get into the habit of singing a tune. It will give you new life and fill you with joy.” Or he said, “Always wear a smile. The gift of life will then be yours to give.” And in speaking of bridges he also said, words that soon we will sing, “Kol HaUlam Kulo, Gesher Tzar Me’od, Ve’Ha”Ikar, Lo Lefached Klal - the whole world is a narrow bridge, the key is not to freak yourself out.”
5. So, if things right now seem too much to handle - and there’s a lot in this world right now that makes it feel like it’s a lot to handle, keep Nachman’s teachings close: The whole world is a very narrow bridge, the key is not to freak yourself out and sing a tune, it will give you new life and will fill you with joy. And

keep doing whatever you can to build bridges towards freedom and hope that we can all walk over. They are a lot more welcoming than fences.