

I recently heard Rabbi Jack Stern reflect about how he felt as he watched Barack Obama cross the stage in Chicago the night he won the presidential election. He said that he had a flash back to 1964, when he travelled down to Mississippi to visit an elementary school shortly after the death of two Jewish and one Black civil rights workers. During that "Freedom Summer" tensions were running high. Hate was in the air. But Rabbi Stern felt he had to go to show solidarity with those who were literally risking their lives to ensure the rights of all Americans. He asked one of the young boys in the school he visited, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Without hesitation boy replied, "A psychiatrist."

"A psychiatrist? Really?! Why that, of all professions?"

"Because," the boy of only 9 or 10 years old answered, "I want to help people understand why they hate so much ... and help them stop."

Rabbi Stern concluded, "And so, when I saw Barack Obama stride to the podium in Grant Park my thoughts turned to that little boy in Mississippi ... and I cried."

I cried, too ... and I suspect I will once again well up with tears this Tuesday during the inauguration. It is not simply because I respect this Barack Obama, which I do. It is not only out of pride that I am blessed to live in a country where political opponents can oust one another without violence, where the electorate decides, not guns or money. I cry because of where we have come from - and what this could mean for where humanity may be heading.

I was in Europe when the elections took place last November - and in the days after I was constantly asked, "What do you think about the U.S. elections?" Even then I was hesitant, realizing that the hype about Obama will eventually confront the reality of a complex world in a tortured time. So what I said was how proud I am to be from a land with a history of slavery and inequality that had faced its demons - and maybe was on the verge of overcoming them. I told the people I met that I don't know another country in the the world where the child of a black immigrant, raised by a white mother, could, by dint of intellect and acumen, rise to the highest seat of power.

In a thousand years, when our descendents look back, they may well mark this moment as a time when humanity finally began to rise above fear and tribalism, to

embrace the best of what we could be. At least, that is what I pray this Shabbat. When Barack Obama is inaugurated as the forty-fourth president of the United States, it will be a fitting coda to the day before, when we recall the accomplishments of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. My prayer, however, is that with his inauguration might be ushered in an age when - if it is too much to ask for the hate to cease - at least it will be diminished in its power.

The ideal represented by Reverend King and President-elect Obama is at the very heart of the Torah portion we read this week. Our *parasha* (Torah portion), the first in the book of Exodus, focuses on the slavery of our own people in Egypt. In this book is our own people's foundation story - our oppression in Egypt and ultimate redemption. Our lives were made "bitter with harsh labor" - a refrain of pain our ancestors would suffer again and again in history.

We Jews have oft been the victim of prejudice and misunderstanding. Even in this land it has not always been easy for us to always live openly as Jews. In the 1930's there were quotas in this country limiting the number of Jews who could enter universities. Not much more than half a century ago it was still legal to bar Jews from certain neighborhoods. Given this, it should not come as a surprise that there was, during the heyday of the civil rights movement, a natural affinity between blacks and Jews.

In 1965, Rabbi Max Nussbaum invited Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. to give a sermon at Temple Israel in Hollywood, California. Rabbi Nussbaum had been born in Germany and escaped the Holocaust. His experience of hate led him - and his congregation - to be active in the struggle for civil rights in America. During his remarks, Reverend King spoke of the immorality of prejudice and hate that linked Jews and African-Americans. "We are caught," he said, "in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly."¹ His remarks are a reminder that story of Exodus is a universal one - meaningful for us, but also for others.

When the Torah describes the enslavement of the Hebrews, the focus is on the king of Egypt, Pharaoh, whose intransigence and hatred was the root of our suffering.

¹<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6843464>

But if it was only he, why did all Egypt suffer from the plagues? It is because a nation that oppresses another - and looks away - is guilty. All of Egypt suffered, because all allowed the wrongdoing to occur.

But the wrongs of a nation can be righted. In Torah we read that on the dawn of the first morning of the Exodus, along with the Hebrew slaves came an *erev rav* a "mixed multitude." Who were these people? These were the men and women in Egypt willing to join the people of Israel in their journey toward freedom. They were not of one people or race, but of different ones. And that is the point. Freedom is for all.

The struggle against Egypt was not an attack against the nation itself, therefore, but the evil that gripped it. Slavery was an infection that not only led to the oppression of our people, but was sickness within the Egyptians themselves. The plagues, therefore, were attempts - ever increasing in severity - to remind the people of that land of the infection that sapped the moral strength of her people. Yet just as immorality can grip a nation, so can righteousness, hope and justice spread - unbound by the limits imposed by status or background.

Many people proclaim President-elect Obama as America's first African-American President. It is a claim only partly true - and because it his black heritage is only *part* of the truth about him, to speak in this way misses the point of what he represents. He is black ... and white. As he himself said in an October interview with Larry King, "There is not a liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America. There is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America - there's the United States of America."²

This country is not always everything it hopes to be. We are not everything we always want to be. But we are more than we sometimes give ourselves credit for. And Barack Obama reminds us of who we might be at our best. Even though he will, most certainly, stumble, his election - just 40 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. - is a statement of this nation that we can break the bonds that chain us. We can put aside the petty hates that shackle the mind and stunt the soul. We

² <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0610/19/ikl.01.html>

are free; all of us - men and women, rich and poor. We are free - regardless of our color or our background.

We are free. This is the great truth of the book of Exodus and at the core of Jewish thought. We stand on the verge of history - on this Shabbat before Martin Luther King Jr. and this most historic inauguration. Like the people of Israel of old - we stand on the shores of the sea. We believe in a better day ... we believe in the Promised Land, for us and every human being.

May it come to be ... soon and speedily in our days.