

A Jewish prayer for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 2017

Rabbi Michael Knopf

Eternal God, who is the champion of kindness, justice, and equity in our world (cf. [Jeremiah 9:23](#)):

As we remember and honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., help us to understand and rededicate ourselves to the demands that Dr. King's legacy continues to make of us.

Dr. King's life's work was to remind us that the most fundamental precept of Your law is that all human beings are equal.

Remembering that we are all equal, help us understand and rededicate ourselves to the principle that none of us, no matter how powerful and privileged or subjugated and aggrieved, has the right to harm another. When he accepted his Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King remarked that Your law "rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation." "Violence and oppression," he said, "cannot be overcome with violence and oppression."

Remembering that we are all equal, help us understand that no law is just or moral unless, as Dr. King wrote from his jail cell in Birmingham, it "uplifts human personality." We are therefore duty bound to fashion societies that square with the inalienable principle of human equality and the infinite measure of human dignity. We are responsible to and for each other, regardless of whether or not we are directly impacted by injustice. Equality for all is the concern of all. And we are obligated to protest – even to disobey – laws that violate Your will.

Remembering that we are all equal, help us understand that there is no neutral place in which any of us can stand, and no time of injustice befitting inaction: "We will have to repent," Dr. King wrote, "not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of [people] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation."

Therefore, help us understand that either we are on the side of Your justice or we are opposed to it. Either we are engaged in shaping a society in which every single person is uplifted, or we are helping some remain privileged and powerful while others are degraded and disenfranchised. Every moment we are not fighting for justice we are impeding it, for "justice too long delayed is justice denied." Neutrality is not a position of sensible moderation between extremes. Rather, silence is a shield for the forces of the status quo. Neutrality is the ally of injustice.

Remembering that we are all equal, help us remain faithful that the span of history will tend toward justice, that “every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low,” that “the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places straight, and the glory of The Eternal shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together” ([Isaiah 40:4-5](#))

Dr. King repeatedly urged us to reject despair, to recall that good, even if temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant. He admonished us to refuse to accept that our present reality is inevitable, or incontrovertible, or as good as it gets.

Let us, then, hold fast to that hope. Let us, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power.” Let us, in Dr. King’s words, muster that hope to have the “courage to face the uncertainties of the future...[to] give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom.” Let us remember that Dr. King’s work is not yet done, and that even though “our days [may be] dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights...darker than a thousand midnights,” that we are yet “living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.”

We are called upon to be the midwives of that new world. May it be Your will that we answer the call.

Amen.

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