

Par'shat *B'shallah* and MLK Day, January 14, 2022; 13 Shevat 5782

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

דְּבַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ

רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אָמַר אֶמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמֹשֶׁה, עַתָּה לְקַצֵּר וְעַתָּה לְהֶאָרִיךְ, בְּנֵי שְׂרוּיִם
בְּצַעַר וְהֵימָּה סוּגְרִים וְהָאֵיב רֹדֵף, וְאַתָּה עוֹמֵד וּמְרַבֵּה בְּתַפְלָה, דְּבַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ

“Then the Eternal said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to go forward.’ (Sh’mot 14:15). According to Rabbi Eliezer, the Holy said to Moses: There is a time to be brief and a time to be lengthy. My children are in great distress, the sea is enclosing them, the enemy is in pursuit, and you stand here praying away! “Speak to the children of Israel, and tell them to go forward.” (Midrash, Sh’mot Rabba 21:8)

Yesterday, Rabbi Sy Dresner died at the age of 92. He was one of the last living rabbis of a group of seventeen arrested in June 1964 in St. Augustine, Florida. They went to St. Augustine at the behest of Dr. Martin Luther King, as part of a desegregation witnessing action.

Rabbi Dresner was a close friend and associate of Dr. King. He and many of those arrested with him were my teachers in one way or another, either as my youth rabbis, rabbinical school professors, or senior colleagues.

Here is an excerpt from the letter they wrote in their cell at 3:00 AM that night. Surely you will hear echoes of the midrash I began with, as well as strains of the Song of the Sea, the *Shirat Hayam*, which forms the centerpiece of this week’s Torah portion. (I have not edited or “updated” the original language of the letter.)

From the letter of 17 rabbis arrested in St. Augustine June 1964:

We went to St. Augustine in response to the appeal of Martin Luther King addressed to the CCAR Conference, in which he asked us to join with him in a creative witness to our joint convictions of equality and racial justice.

Shortly after our confinement in the St. John's County Jail, we shared with one another our real, inner motives. They are, as might be expected, mixed. We have tried to be honest with one another about the wrong, as well as the right, motives which have prompted us. These hours have been filled with a sense of surprise and discovery, of fear and affirmation, of self-doubt and belief in God.

We came to St. Augustine mainly because we could not stay away. We could not say no to Martin Luther King, whom we always respected and admired and whose loyal friends we hope we shall be in the days to come. We could not pass by the opportunity to achieve a moral goal by moral means – a rare modern privilege – which has been the glory of the non-violent struggle for civil rights.

We came because we could not stand quietly by our brother's blood. We had done that too many times before. We have been vocal in our exhortation of others but the idleness of our hands too often revealed an inner silence; silence at a time when silence has become the unpardonable sin of our time. We came in the hope that the God of us all would accept our small involvement as partial atonement for the many things we wish we had done before and often.

We came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly, watching the smoke rise from Hitler's crematoria. We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man's capacity to act.

We shall not forget the people with whom we drove, prayed, marched, slept, ate, demonstrated and were arrested. How little we know of these people and their struggle. What we have learned has changed us and our attitudes. We are grateful for the rare experience of sharing with this courageous community in their life, their suffering, their effort. We pray that we may remain more sensitive and more alive as a result.

We shall not soon forget the stirring and heartfelt excitement with which the Negro community greeted us with full-throated hymns and hallelujahs, which pulsated and resounded through the church; nor the bond of affectionate solidarity which joined us hand in hand during our marches through town; nor the exaltation which lifted our voices and hearts in unison; nor the common purpose which transcended our fears as well as all the boundaries of race, geography and circumstance.

We hope we have strengthened the morale of St. Augustine Negroes as they strive to claim their dignity and humanity; we know they have strengthened ours.

Each of us has in this experience become a little more the person, a bit more the rabbi he always hoped to be (but has not yet been able to become). We believe in man's ability to fulfill God's commands with God's help. We make no messianic estimate of man's power and certainly not of what we did here. But it has reaffirmed our faith in the significance of the deed. So we must confess in all humility that we did this as much in fulfillment of our faith and in response to inner need as in service to our Negro brothers. We came to stand with our brothers and in the process have learned more about ourselves and our God. In obeying Him, we become ourselves; in following His will we fulfill ourselves.

And so we return to our original Midrash: "My children are in great distress, the sea is enclosing them, the enemy is in pursuit, and you stand here praying away! "Speak to the children of Israel, and tell them to go forward."

True in 1964, and every bit as true today. It is a time to be brief, and to go forward arm in arm.