

The Legacy of MLK

January 15, 1982

Beerman's address on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was delivered a year before the United States Congress voted to create a day in honor of MLK (and four years before the commemorative day was formally inaugurated in 1986). Beerman felt a deep bond of identification with Dr. King for various reasons. They were both clergymen who labored hard to meet the demands of their congregants. They were both preachers who understood the power of rhetoric to inspire. They were both tireless advocates who sought to realize the prophetic imperative to social justice. And they were both drawn to the principle of nonviolence, which King and Beerman learned about from Rev. James Lawson, who introduced nonviolence to the civil rights movement after studying it in India in the 1950s.

Beerman's own commitment to racial and social equality began as an adolescent in Michigan and was fortified during his time as one of the "social justice boys" at Hebrew Union College. As a young rabbi, he gained a reputation for speaking out on behalf of racial equality. Throughout the 1960s, he was one of the most prominent rabbinic voices on the West Coast in support of the civil rights movement, not only calling on his congregants to protest injustice, but joining forces with black colleagues on the streets. In this regard, Beerman's activism paralleled that of the well-known East Coast rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with his good friend Martin Luther King in Selma and elsewhere, and Joachim Prinz, who spoke at the March on Washington in 1963 just before Dr. King. King would remain a source of inspiration to Beerman throughout his life, and he devoted a sermon to the civil rights leader's life every year.

Martin Luther King, Jr. would have been fifty-three years old today—still a young man. It seems difficult to believe that almost fourteen years have gone by since that day in April 1968, when he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. So much has

happened to us, to this country, and to the world since 1968. So many dreams have been broken and trampled upon and so many have been at least partially realized. One thing for certain: here in the state of California little black children have a holiday in honor of someone who looks like them. If for no other reason than this the celebration of King's birthday is a notable occasion. For fifty-three years after his birth, fourteen years after his death, twenty-eight years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* (the Supreme Court decision ending segregation in the public schools of America) far too many little black kids grow up without knowing what to do with themselves. Now in the beginning of what even President Reagan has called a Recession more than twenty-five percent of the young blacks are unemployed. Their government is not extending them much concern; it is indeed a dark time for these darker People, and there is no Martin King to inspire them.

There is simply no way for them to experience the strength and the courage that came from being part of the mass movement that he led, no way for them to be among those who once sang in the meetings, sang in the streets, and sang in the jails, nor to be among the 200,000 who stood before the Lincoln Memorial and heard King say, "I have a dream . . ."

King's life is inextricably intertwined with the great moments in the civil rights movement: Montgomery, Birmingham, the March on Washington, Selma. A dedicated leader, an eloquent advocate of nonviolence, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. And he was a pastor, there in the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. And with academic degrees, first from Morehouse College in Atlanta, then from a theological seminary, Crozer, in Chester, Pa., he, after some studying at the U. of Pennsylvania, and at Harvard, eventually received a Ph.D. from Boston University. And in addition to that, some 200 honorary degrees by colleges and universities here and throughout the world. A magical quality about him, none of us who lived through that era will ever forget him. All the efforts to denigrate his character, some fomented by the FBI, cannot cancel half a line of his greatness as a Black leader and as a powerful moral symbol.

King was not born to greatness, he had to be nudged into it. Montgomery, Alabama, provided the ground from which King vaulted into national prominence. The Montgomery of September 1954 may have seemed like an unlikely place for American history to rise to high drama. 80,000 population, 50,000 Negroes, and to most of the 30,000 Whites the Negro populace were essentially instruments to be dominated, and endured. The Black population had been subjected over the years to many indignities, like hundreds of cities throughout the South. Particularly annoying to Black leaders was the Montgomery City Lines, a northern owned bus company. The blacks provided seventy percent of the company's revenue. As in practically all Southern cities bus passengers in Montgomery seated themselves on a segregated, first come first served basis with Negroes seating themselves from the rear forward and whites taking seats from the front backward. In Montgomery, however, unlike some of the more enlightened Southern

cities, the first four seats were reserved exclusively for the white patrons. What was especially galling to many Negroes was that the driver was empowered to order Negroes sitting in the foremost section to yield their seats to white customers. This was a flagrant reminder of white supremacy, as if the Blacks could forget. Moreover, it was not uncommon for drivers to require Blacks to pay their fares at the front door, get off, and re-board the bus through the rear door. Some of the Black leaders like E. D. Nixon of the NAACP had tried to arouse the populace against these abuses, but they were unsuccessful. The Negroes were just slumbering, passively, placidly.

So it was that in September 1954, M. L. King Jr. came to become pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery. A new man and a new movement unknown to one another were about to coalesce. Mr. King unpacked his books, and he and his wife Coretta moved into a big white frame parsonage. From the beginning, King stressed social action, organized a social action committee in his congregation, which urged every member to become a registered voter, and a member of the NAACP. King was no radical; he leaned toward the gradualist approach as fostered by the Alabama Council on Human Relations, an interracial group. In these early months of his Montgomery ministry, King was working on his doctoral thesis, writing several hours every morning and every night. He also worked on his sermons so that within nine months of his coming to Montgomery he had earned a reputation as a fine preacher. Into this relatively quiet, conventional, ministerial life philosophic reading in the morning, visits to the sick, marrying, baptizing, burying—came a day in December, a warm day for December. At the Court Square where in the days of the Confederacy Negro slaves had been auctioned, a Montgomery City Lines bus passed by and pulled to a stop. There were twenty-four Blacks on the bus, Rosa Parks among them, she was sitting behind the white section which was filled with twelve white passengers. Six whites boarded the bus and the driver left his seat and asked the Negroes in the foremost section to get up and give their seats to the white patrons. It was an ancient custom and aroused no comment. Three of the blacks rose immediately, but Rosa Parks remained seated. The driver asked her again to yield the seat, and Rosa Parks, a rather sweet-tempered woman, again refused. The driver then summoned police officers who arrested Rosa Parks for violating the city's segregation ordinance.

Why did she do it? Why did she refuse to move? "I don't really know," she would say later. "There was no plan at all. I was just tired from shopping. My feet hurt." That was where the Negro rebellion had its beginning, that intersection of the pain of feet and a deeper pain, the pain of the heart, and perhaps something else, the receptivity of the moment, as Wm. James called it. E. D. Nixon, the Pullman porter, took the lead in the first phase of the controversy; it was he who provided bail for Rosa Parks and he who suggested that SOMETHING must be done. First, after a lot of telephoning to the local clergy it was decided to stage a one-day bus boycott. The mimeograph machines pumped out their instructions: "Don't ride

the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday, December 5 . . . come to a mass meeting.” The Montg. Improvement Assoc. was formed and M. L. King, Jr. was elected president. Why King? For two reasons: He was new in the community and was not identified with any faction in a divided leadership. King was named because almost no one wanted to be identified publicly as the leader.

That day the Blacks walked, rode mules, drove wagons; the boycott was almost totally effective. It was decided to extend the boycott until the company met certain minimum demands and what were the demands? Courtesy, a first come first served system within the bounds of the segregated system and employment of black bus drivers on predominantly Negro lines—all these demands were rejected by the city officials and bus officials.

Addressing the mass meeting, King reviewed the long train of abuses, “our method,” he said, “will be that of persuasion, not coercion.” He went on to speak of the transforming power of love: “Love must be our regulating ideal. Love your enemies; bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you. If we fail to do this, our protest will end up as a meaningless drama on the stage of history, and its memory will be shrouded with the ugly garments of shame. In spite of the mistreatment that we have confronted we must not become bitter, and end up hating our white brothers. Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him.” Then building to a crescendo he said: “If you will protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations the historians will have to pause and say, ‘There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’ This is our challenge, and our overwhelming responsibility.”

That’s where it all began; that’s where it all began. In August of 1963, eight years later, he would stand before 250,000 people who had participated in the great March on Washington—eight years of marches through the streets of the hardcore white supremacist cities, the years of police dogs, fire hoses, tear gas, repeated imprisonment, the years of student demonstrations.

The experience in Montgomery brought clarity to the thinking of M. L. King. It was out of that experience, as he would later attest, that he became more and more convinced of the power of nonviolence. Nonviolence became more than a method to which he gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life. He had come to see that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. Nonviolence would not accomplish miracles overnight, he knew. When the underprivileged demand freedom, the privileged react with bitterness and resistance, even when the demands are couched in nonviolent terms. But the nonviolent approach does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them self-respect. It calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. And finally, it so stirs the conscience of the opponent that reconciliation becomes a reality.

How did he hold on to those convictions? He knew few quiet days. Imprisoned twelve times, his home bombed twice, a day seldom passing when he and his family did not receive threats of death. Victim of a near fatal stabbing; battered by the storms of persecution. Tempted always to retreat to a more quiet, serene life, but every time something came to strengthen his determination to go on.

King was not satisfied to limit the practice of nonviolence to the struggle for racial justice in the U.S.A. He believed it was necessary to experiment with nonviolence in all areas of human conflict and particularly on an international scale. He had seen too much of hate, he said, to want to hate, himself: hate on the faces of too many sheriffs, too many white citizen's councilors, too many Klansmen. We must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. Do to us what you will and we will still love you."

It was on a hot August afternoon in 1963 in Washington that King spoke of his dream, a dream that every colored person in the world would be treated with respect, that justice would roll down like waters, as the prophet Amos once said, and righteousness like a mighty stream. That one day, war would come to an end, that swords would be beaten into plowshares and nations will study war no more. Many of his dreams were turned into nightmares; he became a victim of deferred dreams of blasted hopes, but in spite of that he still preserved his faith that the struggle for justice must go on, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

My friend Jim Lawson, pastor of the Holman Methodist Church, said the other day at a prayer breakfast in honor of MLK, this day is not a gift to the Blacks. If the Blacks needed a holiday they would take it, just as Jews, Muslims and others take a holiday. But, he said, this day is important to the nation; the nation as a whole needs a MLK holiday as a human rights day. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestant and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, Free at last, Thank God almighty, we are free at last."

COMMENTARY BY THE REVEREND JAMES M. LAWSON JR.

Rabbi Leonard Beerman and I shared a prophetic and biblical enthusiasm for the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott.¹ It was the first sociopolitical "equality and liberty" struggle in Western history that named itself a nonviolent campaign (nonviolence, a term coined by Mohandas Gandhi of India around 1906, to describe his initial experiments to resist the oppression facing Indian immigrants in then

Boer-British South Africa. He defined nonviolence as “love in action”).² That campaign catapulted the very young African American Martin Luther King Jr. onto the world stage as the advocate and voice against “injustice anywhere” and for the wellness and beauty of all peoples.

Yet even in 1982, Rabbi Beerman was one of the very, very few people of influence in a congregational vocation or the academy or public life who could create and deliver such a carefully researched and empathetic message: how the people began; they selected a voice and with others executed the structures and logistics, and they effected the monumental rejection of Jim Crow law and custom and all the indignities associated with both. Dr. King articulated and lived out the simple yet awesome notion that ordinary people energized by the force of human/sacred love can defeat wrong and its tyranny. Beerman grasps Montgomery and King’s meaning. The boycott was a terrific tactic for dismantling the injustices of the systemic injustice of the bus company and the city. The scholar Gene Sharp has since documented more than two hundred such tactics. But the rabbi of Los Angeles also insists that King practiced nonviolence as a way and theology and spirituality of life, to be applied and lived or acted upon.

Leonard Beerman was an intellect out of the spirit of God of the Jewish Bible, a mystic, thinker, and practitioner. Just a few days ago I met the immigration activists who walked from the Mexico-Arizona border to the detention and deportation center in downtown Los Angeles. A few of us represented a steady line from Montgomery to our continuing struggle for all residents of our country. After our rally and assembly there before that fortress-like structure of our national insanity, we walked around the edifice. I saw again the places where Rabbi Beerman and hundreds of us carried on a soul force campaign against injustice in El Salvador and Los Angeles. In those weeks and months of 1980 I do not know how many times Leonard was detained by federal marshals. But Leonard and Martin were signs of the “word made flesh.”