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MLK

We have a number of personalities in our tradition who spoke out about injustices in their society, defended the oppressed, and encouraged Jews to live more piously. These people are referred to as the Prophets. In fact, the social world in which they lived isn't all that different than our world today. There is still political corruption, social and economic injustice, morally challenged people and a large proportion of Jews who have left Jewish communities.

It might be nice if we were sent prophets to set us straight. However, we learn that the prophet's contemporaries didn't listen to them at all. It is us, people living thousands of years later, who heed the prophets' calls for righteousness and change.

We are now in the book of Exodus which focuses on Moses, the greatest Jewish leader and prophet that we've ever known. We learn that he was humble, he listened to others, and he got the job done.

Moses wasn't born a prophet. So why was he chosen to lead and act as the mouthpiece for God. We can follow his moral development through three conflicts that arise in his early adulthood. And from these experiences we begin to understand why. One day, he witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. So what does he do? Moses strikes the Egyptian down.

The next day, Moses finds two Hebrews fighting, so he tries to break up the fight by asking them why they're hurting each other. They respond, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses, frightened for his life that the word is out about his crime, flees from home and arrives in Midian.

Here, he witnesses a group of male shepherds abusing seven sisters who were fetching water at a well. Moses stands up for the women and drives the shepherds away.

From these three instances, we see an evolution of Moses' actions from the particular to the universal. First, he defends one of his own against an "other"; next he engages in Jewish conflict-resolution; and finally Moses sticks up for oppressed strangers.

As individuals and as Jews in the 21st century, we are responsible not only to protect our own, but to be social justice activists for all people throughout the world.

This weekend we honor a legendary hero in our society, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The dream of Dr. King was of a world the way it could be – he had the courage to refuse to accept his society the way it was. He risked his body, his reputation, his freedom in order to stand up to a

system that was unjust. And it did, unfortunately cost him his life. However, the changes he brought about have become his undying legacy and his message is a timeless one. I have no doubt that he too was a prophet just like those in our tradition.

Our Jewish and American heroes teach us to stand up to inequality. It is easy to complain about the ills of our society—that is an important first step—but if we fail to take action, we become a part of the pervasive culture that facilitates the problems we see. We all know this, cognitively, but if those who came before us had not stood up for us, none of us would have the choice to ignore our societal problems.

It is a New Year, a time for each of us to explore new opportunities. With the amount of suffering locally as well as globally, we each can find a cause to rally around and stand up for. In fact, the Beth Israel Social Action Committee created a survey that has been available through the weekly e-letters and website, which hopes to pinpoint some common areas of interest amongst our community. In other words, from your feedback from 8 questions, we will have a better idea of the issues you are most passionate about tackling head on; from hunger, economic justice, human trafficking and the list, sadly, goes on.

I know there is a concern from many of us about a synagogue taking action, even getting political. But, this is an aspect of Judaism that we are called on, by our prophets, sages and texts, to meet and not shy away from. Doing this kind of work is just as “Jewish” as observing Shabbat, wearing a kippah and not mixing milk and meat. And we don’t have to choose between acts of loving-kindness and study or worship. Our goal as Jews, writes Rabbi David Saperstein, is “to weave [them] together into a stronger tapestry of Jewish life.”

Reform Judaism was created as a prophetic movement. And CBI does an exceptional job of assisting those in need. But there is always more we can do, there is always something or someone for us to stand up for. This call to action is part of who we are as a people.

Dr. King once said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” And it is why a slew of rabbis, including one of my own mentors, Rabbi Richard Levy, marched alongside Dr. King decades ago, and prayed a Shabbat service in a Mississippi prison.

Let us use this long weekend as an invitation to start working to repair our world directly – either by actively thinking about and reading about issues we want to get involved in, or by taking our survey, or by making a firm commitment to ourselves that this year we will strive to be as prophetic as we are able. Then we will truly be honoring the legacy of a man and a movement whose dreams we all hope to realize.