

Rosh Hashana:
Holding On: The High Holiday Lesson of the Birmingham Bell
Rabbi Avi Weiss
Co-Founder, Maharat

Originally published on blogs.timesofisrael.com

I always felt terrible for missing Martin Luther King's March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in the summer of 1963. I was a young man then, not yet twenty. Coming from a yeshiva background, it was all so foreign. And yet, when I heard his "I have a dream" speech on TV, I felt a spiritual stirring.

Over the years, King became one of my heroes, one of my rebbes in spiritual activism. When I heard of the fiftieth anniversary commemoration, I resolved to be there.

As a rabbi, preparing for the fast approaching High Holidays, I was trying to save time by taking a quick shuttle flight from New York, arriving in Washington at about 1:30pm, in time for President Obama's speech.

God had other plans. My flight was cancelled. Once boarding the next shuttle, we sat on the runway for well over an hour, as thundershowers came through.

I thought, maybe it's just not in the cards – it's just not going to happen.

Once landing, knowing that the rally was over, I contemplated turning around and immediately flying back. But there was something in me that impelled me to go forward with my plans.

Maybe it was the respect I wanted to show for Dr. King, not only for his universal message, but for his speaking out for Soviet Jewry. In one phone hook-up conversation he had with Jewish leadership in December 1966, he poetically said:

"We cannot sit complacently by the wayside while our Jewish brothers in the Soviet Union face the possible extinction of their cultural and spiritual life. Those who sit at rest, while others take pains, are tender turtles and buy their quiet with disgrace."

Speaking out for others when every ounce of one's energy is needed to defend one's own people is a deep expression of spirituality, teaching one of Dr. King's most important lessons: we are all interconnected – if one person is not free, we are all not free.

I took a quick taxi ride and arrived just as the rally ended. The rally was over, but I soon found out that I was not late.

Had I been at the rally, I would have been somewhere in the back, heard the speeches, and left. The moment may have felt different. Coming afterwards allowed me to draw closer to it all.

Walking towards the Lincoln Memorial was memorable. Being with people of all backgrounds, many of them making their way out, but with thousands still milling about was itself significant, as it was a glimpse of the prophet's vision that God's house would one day be a house for all people.

I came pretty close to the Lincoln Memorial – within a few feet of the bell from the Sixteenth-Street Church in Birmingham, AL, where four young girls were tragically killed during the civil rights movement. It had been brought in for the commemoration and rung eight times just before the President spoke.

I was feeling something deep. The Lincoln Memorial is not the Western Wall, but it is a place of holiness. Here, fifty years ago, Martin Luther King dreamed. And here, fifty years ago people young and old, black and white, stood together as they did now.

Much like a pebble cast into a pond, creating ripples and mystically affecting every part of the larger world, great moments continue on even after they are over. And certainly, the place of the event eternally houses that moment's experience.

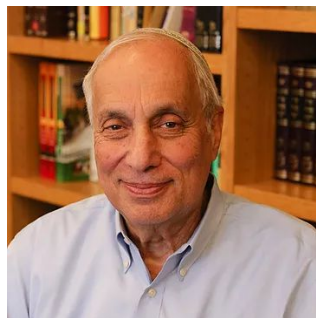
The commemoration event had ended. The King speech was a jubilee of years behind us. And yet, they both continued reverberating in different ways.

While three presidents spoke at the commemoration, no president was present fifty years ago. But, for me, the most powerful rallies are not the events where politicians speak to the people, but where people speak to the politicians.

I missed the first rally, came to the second as it ended, and most probably won't be around to attend its centennial.

As I walked away I took a final glimpse at that Birmingham bell. It has special significance in this High Holiday season. For the larger world, a bell shares the same significance as the Jewish shofar – a sound of redemption, of freedom.

Being in that space on that day served to help me spiritually prepare for the upcoming holidays. Arriving afterwards reminded me to value the echoes of that bell, and of the shofar, as much as the sound itself.



Rabbi Avi Weiss, Co-Founder, is founding rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale –the Bayit, Bronx, New York, and founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. He is also co-founder of the International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF), an international organization of Modern Orthodox rabbis, and PORAT: People for Orthodox Renaissance And Torah. Rabbi Weiss served as National Chairman of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ) from 1982 to 1991 and subsequently as National President of AMCHA –the Coalition for Jewish Concerns, raising a voice of moral conscience on behalf of the Jewish people and humankind throughout the world. Rabbi Weiss has authored numerous books, articles and editorials published in journals and newspapers around the world. His new book, Journey to Open Orthodoxy, will be published later this year.