

## Opening Remarks—Erev Shabbat Service in Honor of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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Shabbat Shalom everyone. My name is Brian Stoller. I am the senior rabbi here at Temple Beth-El of Great Neck.

As a new rabbi in this community, this is my first MLK service at Temple Beth-El. I've heard so much from our congregants about this meaningful and inspiring tradition, and I'm excited to experience it with all of you tonight.

Before we begin, I want to express our gratitude to Roger Tilles, a past president of our congregation, for all you have done to help imagine and create tonight's service, and for arranging for Attorney General Letitia James to speak here in our sanctuary.

You bring such honor to this community by your passion for and dedication to the pursuit of justice, education, and *tikkun olam*, repairing our world.

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To begin our service, I'd like to read an excerpt from a sermon by Temple Beth-El's beloved Rabbi Jacob Philip Rudin, which he delivered on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, September 18, 1963. Here's how Rabbi Rudin described his experience that year participating in one of the Civil Rights movement's seminal events, the March on Washington.

The words of Rabbi Rudin:

"There has never been a parade like that one. It was beautiful and exalting, magnificent and wonderful. It was a parade that could take place only in a country in which the people are sovereign.

"It was a parade which said in triumphant proclamation that in America, with the consent of the government, citizens could gather freely, speak freely, march freely, criticize freely.

"It was a parade to say that America believed in itself. It was a parade to say that in America, despite the faltering, it is bigotry which is embattled and not freedom. It is prejudice which is on the scaffold, not truth. It is disbelief which is in retreat and not faith. It is injustice which is challenged and not righteousness. ...

"It was as though everybody was marching and nobody was watching; as though people wanted to be part of it and not bystanders, observing it from the outside. ...

"Now and again, the marchers picked up the song, 'We Shall Overcome' and its chant moved through the ranks. But mostly people just walked and looked at each other and smiled.

"They knew that they were sharing something desperately important. They knew they weren't in a parade, really. It was a pilgrimage into tomorrow."<sup>1</sup>

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And of course, Rabbi Rudin had it right: that day was about the future.

And so is tonight.

We do this service every year not merely to remember an historical event—as though it were a moment, or a series of moments, that occurred once and are now fossilized in time. If that were the case, we could simply read about it in history books as a matter of curiosity.

We come together at sacred moments like this, year after year, to translate history into present and future...

We do it, in the words of the Israeli historian Yuval Harari, "to widen our horizons, to understand that our present situation is neither natural nor inevitable, and that we consequently have many more possibilities before us than we imagine."<sup>2</sup>

We honor the history and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to proclaim that the future is now and always in our hands; to affirm our conviction that God has given us the power to shape our own destiny and to create the world we want to live in.

As we listen to the beautiful music, the inspiring prayers, and the passionate words of our honored speaker tonight, let them cause a stir in your soul and inspire you to translate history into future, fate into destiny, and dreams into reality.

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Jacob Philip Rudin, "The March on Washington—1963," in: *Very Truly Yours*, 253

<sup>2</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*, 269