An Inclusive Communal Approach to Honoring the Legacy of Dr. King
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Parashat Vayechi is about legacy.

In the final days of his life, Jacob summons his sons to his bedside so he can offer them each a blessing. He speaks to them about his hopes for them after he's gone and entrusts them with carrying his legacy into the future.

Jacob is the third link in the chain that began with Abraham: a courageous family who, despite their human foibles, brought monotheism to the world. Understandably, before he dies, Jacob hopes that his children will honor his life by upholding the ideals and commitments he stood for.

In midrash, the sages imagine that while Jacob is anxious at first about what his sons will say to this, he exhales in relief once they assure him that his legacy is in good hands.

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Legacy will be our focus next week at Temple Beth-El.

On Friday night January 17, we will host our annual worship service honoring the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

This service is an important part of our congregation's history. MLK himself spoke here in the 1960s, and for many years since then, we have welcomed high-profile civic leaders to our bimah to speak about his immeasurable contributions to the vision of justice and equality for all.

Our service next week will continue this time-honored tradition, but in a bit of a new way. Tonight, I want to tell you about the vision for this new iteration of MLK Shabbat.

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One lesson of the racial-justice movement that captured Americans' attention after the murder of George Floyd is that it is important to honor the diversity of human experiences and, in the name of inclusion, to create spaces that bring people of different backgrounds together on a level playing field.

Long before 2020, TBE's Black-Jewish Dialogue aspired to these same goals and brought people from both communities together in respectful and meaningful conversation. The MLK Shabbat tradition it inspired honored the Dialogue's sacred work in a robust gathering of prayer, song, and fellowship.

I have been honored to participate in the MLK Shabbat service the last couple years since I came to TBE. However, I have noticed some things about it that, in my view, needed to be recalibrated to match the spirit of the present moment.

In 2025, intercultural relationships must reflect the values of inclusion, parity, and pluralism.

To help advance these values, and to honor Temple Beth-El's proud legacy of community leadership on our peninsula, I have joined with Great Neck Plaza Mayor Ted Rosen, Great Neck Chinese Association President

Steve Chen, and other civic leaders to found a new organization called the Great Neck Coalition for Unity. Sitting around the table are leaders from Great Neck's beautiful tapestry of faith traditions, ethnic and cultural groups, business leaders, public educators, and elected officials.

Because the mission of the Great Neck Coalition for Unity is to celebrate diversity and build strong relationships of understanding and respect, I asked my fellow Coalition members to join us in cosponsoring our annual MLK service. They accepted enthusiastically.

We agreed that the best way to honor MLK's vision of mutual learning and affirmation of each other across lines of difference would be to create a worship experience that is non-particularistic and nondenominational.

So, next Friday night, the whole Great Neck community is invited to TBE for a nondenominational service celebrating MLK's legacy through music performed by our interfaith choir, reflections from community members of different faiths and cultures, and a keynote address by the prominent Long Island civil rights attorney Fred Brewington.

I want to thank Roger Tilles for arranging for Fred to speak. I also want to thank our president, Jordana Levine; Rabbi Megan; and our members Steve Weinberg and Chloe Kandel Wong for convening a team of people from the Black community, the Chinese community, and TBE to help envision the service and select speakers to reflect on how MLK has inspired them.

Last but certainly not least, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Shy, Stephanie, Pam Levy, and our interfaith choir director, Nigel Gretton, for preparing the music and working with our interfaith choir to create what I know will be a soul-stirring prayer experience.

For all who want to recite our traditional TBE Shabbat liturgy and say Kaddish that evening, we will hold a brief Shabbat service in the atrium at 6 p.m. Our Nondenominational Great Neck Community Service Honoring the Legacy of MLK will begin at 7 p.m. here in the Rudin Chapel.

I am excited and proud to open our congregation to Great Neck's diverse community as we honor Dr. King's legacy in partnership and collaboration.

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The Talmud tells a story about God bringing Moses into the Beit Midrash of Rabbi Akiva, who of course lived many centuries later. (It's kind of like Charles Dickens' story *A Christmas Carol*, where the ghost shows Scrooge the future, but no one knows he's there watching them.)

As he stands there observing the study hall, Moses listens to Rabbi Akiva lecture about the fine points of Jewish law. When the students ask Rabbi Akiva where he learned these interpretations, he responds: "It is Torah given to Moses at Sinai."

Moses can't believe his ears. "Why is he telling them I said that?" he bellows. "I have no idea what he's talking about!"

The point of this story is that traditions evolve in response to changing times and the changing needs of the people.

Moses never imagined the interpretations of the Torah that Rabbi Akiva was teaching his students in Moses' name, but they were continuations of Moses' legacy, nonetheless. In the end, Moses realizes that, by their creativity and innovation, Rabbi Akiva and his students had found ways to ensure that his teachings would survive in an ever-changing world.

Our innovations to the MLK service are done with same intent: to honor and carry forward the legacy of Rabbi Rudin, Rabbi Davidson, and all who built and participated in the Black-Jewish Dialogue.

Were they to be here next Friday night, they might not recognize the service as the same exact thing they created, but I believe that they, like Moses, would understand that this updated version is what's needed to sustain the spirit of the original into the future.