

Wow, what an introduction. I wish my parents, who are at their home outside of Philadelphia, could have been here to hear it. My father would have enjoyed it. My mother would have believed it. And I'm afraid that after an introduction like that, all I can do is disappoint you.

My friends, I cannot overstate how deeply moved I am by the invitation to be here today, to speak to you as we remember and honor the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. Reverend Marla McDonald, I thank you and your committee from the bottom of my heart for the invitation, and Rabbi Heidi Waldman, God bless you for recommending me. I also thank three members of my congregation for responding to my request to attend today; Sanford, Henry, and Phil, thank you. And most of all, thank you to my middle son, Sammy, who came out to give moral support to his Dad. You see, my friends, I do not get nervous about speaking in public. I get nervous before I give talks that I believe are especially important, and I believe this is one of the most important talks I have ever given in my career.

Two tragedies made powerful impacts on my life when I was a child. The first, which happened when I was only five but which I remember with crystal clarity, was the assassination of President Kennedy. The second was the assassination of Martin Luther King. A third, the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy, was certainly horrific and I do remember it well, but it was the first two that had the strongest impact on me personally, and all three changed the future of America for the worst.

There is a connection between the assassinations of the President and Martin Luther King, which is that the first proved that a nothing human being with a rifle

could change the course of history. It happened a second time when Martin Luther King was killed.

We had two dear family friends, a husband and wife who were United American Methodist Episcopalian clergy. The wife, Liz, looked like the twin sister of Pearl Bailey. I found out about Martin Luther King's death when I came downstairs the morning after he died to find my mother and Liz standing in our kitchen, holding one another, weeping. It was a sight I will never forget.

My friends, perhaps you have noticed that so far, every time I have referred to Martin Luther King Jr., I have used his full name. Not once have I said Dr. King. I would like to begin to make the case for why I never refer to him as Dr. King, and I will begin with a true story.

Of the various movements in American Judaism, I belong to the Conservative Movement. The organization of Conservative rabbis is called the Rabbinical Assembly. Forty-some years ago, Martin Luther King was invited to be the keynote speaker at the annual Rabbinical Assembly convention. Over seven hundred rabbis were in attendance at his speech. As soon as he walked out on stage, before he could utter a word, the rabbis stood and they sang this song to Martin Luther King. They sang:

אנו נתגבר

אנו נתגבר

יום יבוא ונתגבר

וכאן בליבי

יש אמונה שלמה

(ש) יום יבוא ונתגבר

It was “We Shall Overcome” in Hebrew, and by the end of the verse, Martin Luther King was weeping. He composed himself, and then said to the Rabbinical Assembly, that never in his life did he imagine he would ever hear the words to “We Shall Overcome” sung in the language of the Biblical prophets.

My friends, there is a battle being fought in American today. It is, thank God, largely a non-violent battle thus far, but it is a battle nonetheless. It is a battle for the soul of America. It is battle between those who want to preserve the American tradition of a secular government but a religious society, versus those who would have us become an American Europe, a Godless society. Only recently a mother in my congregation told me she was chastised by the principal of her child’s school for saying “Thank God” in a private conversation with the principal. And so, my friends, I say to you today, that it is not Dr. Martin Luther King that we so sorely miss and whom we should remember today. It is *Reverend* Martin Luther King Jr. And if you want to include his doctorate when you address him, that is fine—then let us remember *the Reverend* Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But let me share with you something stunning. I have very smart, very well educated children. Of course I am going to say that; I’m Jewish. Maybe you know about the Jewish grandmother who was asked the ages of her grandchildren and she replied, “The doctor is four and the lawyer is two.” That’s just what we do. But my children are smart and well educated; the youngest is a junior in Carmel High School, and none of them were ever taught that *Dr. King* was a Reverend. *None of them had ever heard* of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. That’s like not knowing George Washington was a General because we prefer peace to war. It’s like not knowing that our Democratic Republic was born in Philadelphia. If American society is to retain its

religious soul, the soul that says that human rights come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God as stated in the Declaration of Independence, it is America's Christians who must lead that fight, and it should be well known that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was, first and foremost, a man of God. And perhaps I can speak to that with an extra level of credibility, because I am not a black man, I am not a Christian, I am a Jew. So I have no African-American axe to grind, I have no Christian axe to grind, I have only an American axe to grind.

If the Rabbinical Assembly had sung to the Rev. Dr. King in Ugaritic or Summarian, languages related to Hebrew but of interest only to academics with doctorates, he would not have been moved to tears. He said why he was moved to tears: because he was hearing that powerful song *in the words of the Biblical prophets*, and it moved him as *a man of God*, not because he also held an academic degree.

When the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King sat down to write his magnificent sermon, "I Have a Dream," he did not turn to academic books for inspiration. He turned where any minister, priest, or rabbi would turn, to where any man or woman of God would turn, to the Bible, in this case to the prophet Isaiah, where he read:

"...every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." And these words were one of the paragraphs before which he placed his unforgettable motif, "I have a dream."

This dream, and the entire “I Have a Dream” sermon, was the work of a man of God. *“I have been to the mountaintop, and I have seen the Promised Land,”* was a direct reference to Moses, the writing of a man of God. *“Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"*, is the question of a man of God.

And so, my friends, I implore you, let us not raise generations who have heard of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but do not know that he was a pastor, a Reverend, a man of God who birthed the civil rights movement from the pulpit of the church his father pastored before him, the Ebenezer Baptist Church.

For so many years that I have lost track of the numbers, one of the sound files I have carried everywhere with me on my phone is Senator Robert Kennedy’s impromptu talk, informing an audience who had come to hear another speech, that the Reverend Dr. King had been shot and killed. It was only after moving here to Indiana that I learned that talk had been given here in Indianapolis. I would like to conclude today with just a few of Senator Kennedy’s words.

“Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort...My favorite poet was Aeschylus, and he once wrote, “Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom, through the awful grace of God.” What we need in the United States...is love and wisdom and compassion and a feeling of compassion toward those who still suffer, whether they be white, or whether they be black...But the vast majority of white people, and the vast majority of black people in this country want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings. Let us dedicate ourselves to what the

Greeks wrote so many years ago, “To tame the savageness of man, and make gentle the life of this world.”

In memory of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., let us rededicate ourselves to that task. It may not be finished in our lifetimes, but let us continue the work that he began.