

# THE TALMUDIC TRADITION IN DIALOGUE WITH REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



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*One of the most sacred texts in Jewish tradition is the Talmud which was an ongoing oral tradition that was committed to writing and finally canonized in the sixth Century. The Talmud was designed so that the sacred text was found in the center of the page in large print and later commentaries surrounded the margins of the page. These commentaries explained, asked questions, resolved contradictions and added information. They were actively in conversation with the text.*

*We have borrowed from this format by bringing Dr. King's I have a dream speech as the sacred text with our rabbinic commentators in "conversation" with many of the concepts found in Dr. King's address. We have created a conversation that transcends at least three millennia, but is just as fresh as if it happened an hour ago. Below you will find some navigating questions so that you too can join in the conversation with Dr. King, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Sages of the Jewish Talmud and Midrash.*

## YOUR DREAM NAVIGATOR

### JOYOUS DAYBREAK TO END THE LONG NIGHT

- 1) In the Passover Haggadah the metaphor used to describe the journey from slavery to freedom is "from darkness to great light." How are these metaphors similar? How are they different?
- 2) How is Jewish emancipation portrayed in the Haggadah as opposed to how it is portrayed in Dr. King's speech?

### THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

- 1) When Dr. King speaks of "the fierce urgency of now" whom does he agree with Hillel or Shammai?
- 2) How do you understand Shammai's response to Hillel? To which statements does he respond?
- 3) Does Shammai necessarily disagree with Hillel? Does Hillel necessarily disagree with Shammai? Can you reconcile their statements, or alternatively can you articulate what exactly they are arguing about?

- 4) Are you a Hillel, or Shammai sympathizer and why?

### **GOD'S CHILDREN**

- 1) When Dr. King says “all of God’s children” what is he implying?
- 2) When the Egyptians are drowning is the same sentiment invoked, or is it different?
- 3) If all humans are created in God’s image, does that necessarily imply equality?
- 4) What would equality mean in this context?
- 5) The verse from the Torah that “proves” all of humanity are created in God’s image does so by saying that murderers forfeit their right to live. Why is this a legitimate punishment? Is it right for us to destroy the murderer, another image of God, just because he has chosen to destroy God’s image?
- 6) What are we entitled to as equal images of God?

### **UNTIL JUSTICE FLOWS LIKE WATERS**

- 1) Why are acts of justice more important than acts which are direct service to God—like sacrifices?
- 2) How does the Talmud prove this?
- 3) Can you make the argument that acts of justice are greater than acts of compassion?
- 4) What is negative about justice? What could be negative about compassion?
- 5) Would you like to live in a world of absolute justice? Why or why not?

### **THAT UNEARNED SUFFERING IS REDEMPTIVE**

- 1) What does Dr. King mean by the statement “THAT UNEARNED SUFFERING IS REDEMPTIVE”?
- 2) What is the prize for suffering according to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai?
- 3) Are Dr. King and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai talking about the same thing?

### **THE ROUGH PLACES WILL BE MADE PLAIN**

- 1) What does Dr. King mean when he dreams about “the rough places”?
- 2) How does that dovetail with the reference the rabbis make to the “evil inclination”? Does the statement of Dr. King and the rabbis complement or contradict each other?

### **LET FREEDOM RING**

- 1) What does Dr. King mean by freedom here?
- 2) What does the rabbi mean by freedom?
- 3) Are they the same or are they different?

### **FREE AT LAST**

What is the connection between “truth, justice, peace” and freedom?

Can we truly be free if we know no peace, and have no justice?

*Does anyone enjoy true justice and know true peace?*

