

## **Worship and Action for Peace Letter, 2/4/04**

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

When we are at a loss, when we drop back to fundamentals, what speaks to us?

The teachings of Jesus?

Gandhi?

Courage in the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.?

Are we Friends boundary-crossers, like the Hebrews according to Rabbi Arthur Waskow, the Director of The Shalom Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania?

In his letter (forwarded by Tom Rothschild of Brooklyn Meeting), which follows, Arthur Waskow calls on Jewish understanding to connect with the ultimate, underlying, unnameable, by which we seek to be guided; and he calls readers to respond, to awaken.

Arthur Waskow reports recognizing that God moves us to action. His letter reflects on the meaning of "courage" in the wake of an incident in which he spoke out to an assemblage of influential leaders gathered at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC on January 14<sup>th</sup> to commemorate the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. Rabbi Waskow rose during a momentary pause in the presentations to draw attention to the inconsistency between honoring a man who exemplified nonviolent civil disobedience in the cause of ending injustices and Israel's treatment of Rabbi Arik Ascherman (executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights in Israel) for acting in the manner of King. Arik Ascherman had been arrested and is being prosecuted for standing in the path of Israeli bulldozers that were demolishing the homes of Palestinians.

Arthur Waskow reported on his act of speaking truth to power to recognize and honor the action core of Kingian nonviolence in a January 16, 2004 article on the website of The Shalom Center ([www.shalomctr.org/](http://www.shalomctr.org/)) entitled "Inside Israel's Embassy: Honoring or Dishonoring Dr. Martin Luther King". (The article is available at:

[www.shalomctr.org/index.cfm/action/read/section/IsPal/article/article545.html](http://www.shalomctr.org/index.cfm/action/read/section/IsPal/article/article545.html).)

He noted:

"Some people may have seen as 'disruption' my intervention in the Israeli embassy's annual commemoration of the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King. Other people saw it as a fulfillment of the honor due Dr. King...."

“I am awed by the timing of these events.... [I]t was the week in which we read from the Torah the beginning of the Book of Exodus, which bears the first recorded stories of nonviolent resistance to a violent government: the story of the midwives and then of Miriam and Pharaoh’s own daughter, who refused to carry out Pharaoh’s murderous orders. (Exod. 1:15-22 and Exod. 2: 1-10.)

\* \* \*

“We teach that God is One, that all life is interwoven. It is not just a teaching, not just wishful thinking. It is true Reality - though sometimes it takes a while for the Reality to sink in.

“Not only must we love our neighbors as ourselves, but we DO love our neighbors as we love ourselves. For if we pour hatred out upon our neighbors, our love for each other and ourselves curdles into bile. And poisons us.

\* \* \*

“Or we can choose to surmount our fear, our rage, and reach with care and caring across the boundaries, the doorways, the gateposts - for god is One.”

The responses to Arthur Waskow’s act of speaking truth at the Israeli Embassy, and his report of it in the article excerpted above, prompted his further reflections on Truth and courage in the pastoral letter offered below.

Does Truth call us to action?

Please share your sense of guidance, at home, and more widely. We rely on one another for enlightenment, for steady upholding.

In care,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, Fred Dettmer, Lu Harper  
NYYM Worship & Action Communication

**Facing Fear in Embassy & Torah & Today**  
**Rabbi Arthur Waskow**

Dear Friends,

More than 70 of you wrote to thank me, and five of you wrote to criticize me, for speaking out at the Israeli Embassy’s commemoration of Martin Luther King. (I spoke to point out that the deepest honoring of King was in the

actions of Rabbi Arik Ascherman, who that very day was arraigned for trial by the Israeli government because he tried to prevent the bulldozing of two Palestinian homes.)

Of course my heart was warmed and my spirit lifted by your letters. I was intrigued by one theme--that I had been courageous in speaking out.

In some ways, it seems strange that courage would have to be involved at all. What is so brave about speaking for three minutes to civilized people who are sitting in rows of chairs, wearing suits and carefully knotted ties or kerchiefs? What, after all, could the Ambassador do to me?

Yet I confess I did feel somewhat scared, even while I kept reminding myself that it was ridiculous to be scared. How come? -- Our parents, our teachers, our bosses, our rulers, our mass media, warn us again and again and again not to make trouble, not to challenge Authority. -- I guess it soaks in.

This week's Torah reading in the traditional cycle is about facing someone a lot scarier than the Ambassador. Facing Pharaoh, like Moses, Aaron, Miriam. Like Rabbi Arik, facing the Army and its bulldozer. -- Now THEY had good reason to be scared.

When God sends Moses to face the Pharaoh (Exod 10: 1), the Torah text says, "Bo el Pharaoh." Most English translations say, "Go to Pharaoh." But "Bo" means "come," not "go."

"Come to Pharaoh!"

How can God be saying "Come!" unless God is already there? -- already within Pharaoh! "Come toward Me."

And God's call to Moshe continues: "Hikhdad'ti libo." That is usually translated, "I have made his [Pharaoh's] heart heavy, hard."

But the Hebrew root KVD can mean heavy, or glorious, or honorable, or radiant. Perhaps the English sense of "gravity" -- a force that reaches far beyond its source, radiating through the world -- catches some elements of "KVD." When a leader is said to possess "gravitas," it means he is a "heavy dude," worthy of honor, radiating forth his own glory to faraway places.

So the phrase can be read as: "I, God, have put my radiance in his, Pharaoh's, heart."

In other words: "Come to Me -- the Me who lives hidden inside Pharaoh. Don't be afraid of Pharaoh: what looks like HIS radiance, HIS glory, is really MY radiance, MY glory."

From seeing God hidden within Pharaoh, I can learn both courage and compassion.

Courage as I realize that Pharaoh's seeming power is not his, but just a part of the enormous power of the flow of life, the Unity of universe. If Pharaoh tries to grasp that power as his own, the river and the locusts, the frogs

and the first-borns, will overflow his rigid boundaries and sweep away his power. I do not need to fear it.

Compassion as I recall that even within Pharaoh is the Tzelem Elohim, the spark of God, and I can resist the Pharaoh's tyranny while yet remembering the KaVoD – honor -- due his spark of divinity.

Multiply courage by compassion, and what emerges is nonviolent resistance. I will not obey my enemy, and I will not kill him either. I will pursue my own life-journey into my own and my enemy's freedom.

Rabbi Ascherman tells the story of how when he visited a Palestinian town, parents brought their children to meet with joy an Israeli, a Jew, who came not with a bulldozer or a gun but with friendship and determination to achieve peace.

They wanted their children to know that it was not "Jews" or "Israelis" who were the enemy. So out of Rav Arik's bravery has come the bravery of Palestinians who nonviolently have challenged the power of two Pharaohs of today: the Pharaoh who hides behind an Israeli face, and the Pharaoh of those Palestinians who have themselves become rigidified, terrified, rigidity-making and terror-imposing.

Today, as I write, the news reverberates of another ten Israeli dead. Less loud, less clear, the news also reverberates of another nine Palestinian dead.

Destroying homes breeds the kind of despair and rage that then breeds terrorists. That does not excuse the choice of terrorism, since the choice of nonviolent resistance is also open. But it does teach us that the most effective way for Israelis to stop Palestinian terrorism may be to stop destroying Palestinian homes, stop paving over Palestinian farmland, stop killing Palestinian olive trees.

Twice, Moses and Aaron face Pharaoh saying, "Thus says YHWH. . ." (Exod 10: 3 and 5: 1). In their first encounter, Pharaoh answers, "Who is YHWH?"

Who indeed?

This is the God Who spoke that Name to Moses at the Burning Bush. The Unpronounceable Name -- unpronounceable not because we are forbidden to pronounce it, but because there is no way to "pronounce" it but by simply breathing, "Yyyhhhhwwwhhhh." The Name that reaches across all barriers of language: not Hebrew, or Egyptian, or Sumerian, or Latin, or Greek, or Sanskrit, or Arabic, or English -- but present beneath all of them. The most universal of Names. The Breath of Life, Nishmat Kol Chai, Ruach Elohim.

Moses, Aaron, and Miriam knew that the Breath/Wind/ Spirit of the world intertwined all life. They knew the truth that since all life is intertwined, enslaving a worker would turn the river to blood and kill the firstborn. Not a

vengeful God, but an inexorable karma. The plagues were 'signs' --signs of the times. Truth IS consequences.

Pharaoh rejected that truth. Each plague was an accident. "Global scorching has nothing to do with how we run our factories."

Moses and Aaron might have simply stayed focused on that universal Name. But they added an explanation -- "YHWH, the God of the Ivrim, Hebrews."

Why -- when they were trying to get an Egyptian king to listen -- entangle a universalist assertion with an ethnic claim?

Perhaps they were entering a word-play with Pharaoh. Perhaps "God of the Ivrim, the Hebrews," meant more than an ethnocentric boast. For Ivrim meant "those who cross over," nomads, wanderers, rootless cosmopolites. It seems to have been used by the settled, responsible peoples of the Middle East as a contemptuous label for people who wouldn't stay put where they belonged. "Wetbacks."

Perhaps Moses and Aaron were warning Pharaoh that the Breath of Life -- which blows where it wishes, cannot be captured and pinned down -- is the God of those who cannot be pinned down to one place, one life-path, one Narrow Space.

Moses insists that the Boundary-crossers must leave in order to celebrate a festival for the Breath of Life.

Often this is read today as an attempt to mislead Pharaoh. But if we imagine Moses groping his way toward a broader, stronger form of resistance, and if we ask ourselves what it would mean today for us to take on the task of nonviolent resistance against our generation's Pharaohs, perhaps the festivals can embody that resistance,

When Soviet Jews began dancing for Simchat Torah in the public streets of Moscow, facing what seemed to be a totalitarian regime, that was utterly different from dancing with the Torah in the hidden streets of the ghetto. Their dances began to crack the rigidity of Pharaoh. And they called forth allies.

When American Jews celebrated Passover with Freedom Seders that demanded an end to racism and the Vietnam War, and feminist Seders that affirmed new freedom for women within and beyond the boundaries of Jewish life, they cracked ancient rigidities that required both Jews and women to stay "in their place." They became "Hebrews" -- boundary-crossers.

And when they celebrated Tu B'Shvat by facing the corporations that were draining the Everglades and destroying ancient redwood forests, they invoked those Kabbalists who knew that the shefa of Divine Abundance needs to be renewed on earth as well as heaven. And they had allies.

When Israeli Jews planted olive trees and pine trees on the Festival of Trees, Tu B'Shvat, to protest and redeem both the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees by the Israeli Army and the burning of Israeli pine trees by Palestinian

arsonists, they too were facing the Pharaonic rigidity of governments and of terrorist organizations that were stuck in a narrow place. They too had allies.

Today, how do we -- not just Jews, not just Palestinians -- face the really scary Pharaohs? The Pharaohs who bestride not just the Mediterranean but the planet? The Pharaohs who endanger not just Jews, not just Palestinians, not just the human race, but all of us?