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Sermon for MLK Day

Shabbat *B’Shallach* 5774

The game Peek-a-Boo never ceases to amaze me. If you are playing with an infant, the moment you cover your face, the child becomes bewildered. He loses sight of you, and seems to believe that you have disappeared magically. When you move your hand and reveal your face, the child always yells in delight as your face has reappeared. It is truly astonishing to see that something so mundane and obvious to anyone over 2 years old is full of wonder and delight to an infant. Of course, this only works because the infant does not have the imaginative capacity to understand that even though your face is not readily visible to them, that you are still present. The child needs visual confirmation that you are present in order to know that you have not vanished into thin air. That is to say, vision is the key to belief.

While we all have enough imagination to not be fooled by someone playing Peek-a-Boo, when it comes to our faith, often times our belief is completely tied to what we see in front of us. We need to see in order to believe, and this need of ours can limit us emotionally and spiritually. Consider Carlos Vigil, a 17-year-old gay teenager who took his life back in July. Carlos had been bullied by his peers since the 3rd grade, and in recent years, the name-calling, verbal abuse, and soul-crushing harassment had put Carlos in a very dark place. In his suicide note, Carlos wrote: “The kids at school are right, I am a loser, a freak, a fag, and in no way is that acceptable for people to deal with. I am sorry for not being a person that could make people proud.”[[1]](#footnote--1) This is a horrifically tragic situation that has become heartbreakingly common in recent years. Carlos’ bullies were able to deprive him of all hope by robbing him of his imaginative capacity. He could not see that his life would get better when he got out of school; he could not imagine that he would find people to support and love him; he could not believe in a world that would accept him for who he was. Like the child playing Peek-a-Boo, he could not believe in anything other than his miserable current situation. The darkness that these bullies created in Carlos’ soul, in short, caused him to experience a failure of faith.

We all know that failures of faith are not at all uncommon in our world. Thousands of survivors of the Holocaust who had experienced the worst in humanity lost their faith and their belief that the world could be a better place. Some of them despaired of the world and took their own lives. Many who experience pain and illness go into a very dark and narrow place, consumed by that pain, unable to see past it. The political and economic situation in our country in recent years has shown unprecedented levels of despair and cynicism that this country can follow any kind of vision to a better, more prosperous, and more just place. All of these situations, from personal despair to the national malaise that we feel develop from a lack of vision—our propensity to focus entirely on what is, instead of having faith in what could be.

Failures of faith come up several times in our Torah portion *B’Shallach*. The center of this *parashah* is of course the Song of the Sea, the glorious victory song that the Israelites sang when they passed through the Sea of Reeds unharmed while God drowned Pharaoh and his army. Dazzled at the miracle they had just witnessed, God’s people sing of their savior as an *‘ish milchamah*, a man of war, and ask the question we ask everyday in our liturgy: *mi chamochah ba’elim Adonai*, who is like You, Adonai?[[2]](#footnote-0) Who could possible compare? These are the declarations of people of faith; people who truly believed in the mastery of their God over the might of their enemies. And what inspired this belief? The last verse of the previous chapter gives us a hint. *Vayar Yisrael et-hayad hag’dolah asher asah Adonai b’mitzrayim*, Israel saw the mighty hand that God wielded against Egypt, *vayir’u ha’am et Adonai*, and the people feared God, *vaya’aminu ba’Adonai,* and they believed in God.[[3]](#footnote-1) *Vayar, vayiru, vaya’aminu*: They saw, they feared, and they believed. Why did the Israelites have faith in God? Because they saw Him. Seeing is believing.

But this faith in God did not last very long. With almost comical suddenness, the Israelites change from praising God in song and dance to complaining bitterly against Him. The water was too bitter, they run out of water, they run out of food. To be fair, these are very serious problems—matters of life and death out in the wilderness. Being left without food or water, the Israelites must have felt abandoned and afraid, and sunk into a very dark place. But the fact remains that these same characters had just witnessed the glory of God, the most substantial miracle that we have recorded in our Bible. That they could go from true believers to grumbling doubters so quickly shows us that belief that is attached to seeing is fickle and immature. Rashi, the most famous Medieval commentator on the Bible actually compares the mentality of the Israelites in the desert to a child playing Peek-a-Boo. They believed in their Savior when they were at the sea, but when they experience hardship in the desert, it is as though He had disappeared entirely. Like a child playing Peek-a-Boo, these Israelites assumed that because they could not see Him, that He had abandoned them. Since seeing is believing, then the converse must be true: not seeing is not believing.

If the Israelites in the desert provide us an example of a fickle, immature faith, this leaves us with the question of what a mature faith that can actually sustain us through hardship looks like. The answer to this question, I believe, is demonstrated by the man that we are celebrating in a week and a half. The world that Martin Luther King grew up in was a very dark and despair-inducing place. We must remember that the pain of racism did not just lie in segregated restaurants and buses. Black men and women were killed with impunity by the Klan in the Deep South for registering people to vote. Jim Crow laws rigged the system against them, disenfranchising their vote and utterly preventing them from advancing in life beyond roles of servitude. The racism of many of those in power and the inertia in our political system to enact change would have been enough for anyone to despair and fall into the same dark place of our Israelite ancestors in the desert. After all, what they saw would not have logically led them to believe the world could be better.

Not so for Dr. King. A deeply spiritual man, Dr. King’s faith in a God that loves and fights on behalf of the oppressed gave him a vision for a better world. Dr. King said that: “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Indeed, he could not have seen the whole staircase, given the bleak conditions of the South in the 60s. But his faith led him to say that he refuses to accept that “mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.”For he believed that “unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.” There is a reason, I believe, that so many of the great leaders of the Civil Rights era were men and women of faith. Faith is the undying hope that tomorrow can be different than today. Faith says that a better world is possible, and that it is our moral imperative to work towards that. In other words, faith gives us vision.

I truly believe that faith is something that we all need to cultivate within our souls. This does not have to be faith in God. It can be faith in humanity. Faith in our country, in our community, in ourselves. Faith in unblemished goodness, and faith that we can lead ourselves and our world towards that ultimate goodness. We need faith, because of the undeniable fact that life is hard. Whether we are faced with economic hardship, mental illness or depression, drama within our families, or our own personal brokenness, none of us goes through life unscathed. All of us have at one time or another gone to that dark place in the depths of our souls—that shadow realm that Carlos Vigil suffered in for years—that fills us with pain, that tells us that we are no good or that we are undeserving of love. Faith gives us the vision we need to understand that even when we cannot see the way forward through the shadow, that the light of redemption does exist. A life of loving family and friends, a life in which we have transcended our pain, a world with a little less misery, disease and poverty. So as we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King in the coming days, remember this: seeing is not truly believing. We believe so that we might envision a better world.

1. http://www.advocate.com/youth/2013/07/16/gay-new-mexico-teen-commits-suicide-after-years-bullying [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Exo. 15:3, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Exo. 14:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)