

Why I Joined The March On Washington

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On a Wednesday, August 28, 1963, 44 years ago, I, as one of 200,000 people on the Washington Mall, heard Martin Luther King, Jr. give his immortal speech, "I Have a Dream." Two weeks later on a Friday night I shared my thoughts and feelings of that historic experience with my congregants at Union Reform Temple in Freeport, Long Island.

Herewith is a reprint of my sermon that evening which I believe is as timely today as it was so many years ago.

On August 28th I, together with 40 other Reform Rabbis of the New York area, chartered a bus to join 200,000 responsible Americans on the March to Washington in behalf of greater freedom and equal opportunity for the Negro citizen of the United States.

People came from the North and the South, from the East and West, from all parts of our country. Black and White — they came together; there were even some who came from Europe.

They came by plane and boat, car and bus, on bicycle and on foot. People came from everywhere to demonstrate our deep feeling and concern for the Negro minority of our population and to impress upon our government and particularly the Congress the necessity of granting and guaranteeing complete equality and full citizenship to the colored people of our country. As my colleagues and I left New York at 5:25 a.m., each of us sensed the enormity of our task and the great significance of our mission.

Each of us has since offered a prayer of thanks to God that we were privileged to have been present at that great moment of American history. It is a day that will live in our hearts forever. It was an awe inspiring day. It was a day that can be accounted as a *Kiddush Hashem*, a day set aside to sanctify God's name.

It was an historic day and each of us who has a sense of history felt the impact of this day the moment we entered Washington, D.C. on that bright and warm Wednesday morning.

As our bus rolled into Washington, little children were standing on the street — colored and white, waving American flags and welcoming us to our capital.

As we looked out the bus window we saw something else, another scene, police and soldiers were stationed everywhere.

We were gripped by a sudden fear — what kind of day will it be — will it be a day that will live long in the annals of American history as a day of inspiration and exaltation, or a day when blood will flow as man turns against his brother in physical violence, even armed conflict?

In former times there have been other marches in history by other peoples on their nations' capitals which turned into rioting and bloodshed.

When the Russian people marched on the Romanoff Palaces because their bellies were empty and they had no food for their children, the Czar ordered the police and soldiers to fire upon the crowd and disperse them.

When the French marched for freedom and equality on the Bastille on July 14, 1789, the *Gendarmes* were called forth to destroy the march and kill the people involved.

Each of these marches became a symbol of the tyranny that had to be overthrown and gave strength to stout hearted men to fight for the elimination of the evils of totalitarianism.

We were on a march, a march on Washington.

We were marching on the capital of our country for freedom, and it is a tribute to our democracy and to our government that the police and soldiers were not sent to attack us but were there to protect us and guide us.

Here was a march on the government but unlike the governments of France and Russia of yesteryear, we were welcomed by the government.

This march was sanctioned by the government and encouraged by President Kennedy and consequently, it was because of the well laid plans, the courtesy, understanding and sympathy of the police and the Army that the march on Washington will go down in history as an inspiration to all freedom loving peoples.

But, looking out the bus window that morning, at the police, and soldiers, thinking our thoughts of other great historic events, few of us could be sure of what a glorious day it would turn out to be.

As we disembarked from our buses we were guided to a tent near the Washington Monument, where we met representatives from the Reform Movement throughout the United States.

We were given signs to carry — which were inscribed in Hebrew and English that read:

“Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself”

“Righteousness, Righteousness Shalt Thou Pursue”

“And Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land”

And as the one mile march began from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, down Constitution Avenue, each of us sensed the pride of being Americans.

And I couldn't help but think: Where was our imagination and our strength twenty years ago when Jews were being slaughtered by Nazi Germany?

Why didn't we march on Washington?

Why didn't we muster a quarter of a million people to cry out against the bestiality of the Germans?

If we did, perhaps it would have made a profound difference on Jewish history.

And though the march had a holiday spirit about it — I still couldn't escape the feeling of tragedy, which surrounded me.

All about me there was gaiety and joyousness and a remarkable amiability and friendliness.

Negros and Whites were singing together — “We Shall Overcome” — Young Jewish boys and girls singing in Hebrew while Negro boys and girls where humming the Hebrew tune from the Book of Psalms.

“Behold! How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.” Caught up in all this. I felt a sense of tragedy for 20 million people — who are denied adequate housing, decent education, equal opportunities for jobs and employment.

Amidst all the joy and festivity I felt pain and remorse.

As I looked out on the sea of people standing before the Lincoln Memorial I couldn't help but be profoundly moved.

Who could not be moved by that modern day prophet, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?

It is fortunate for America that we have a Ghandi inspired man, who by virtue of his great charismatic character could have turned that march into a holocaust but instead raised it to new heights, as he spoke of great ideas, of peace and equality, justice and fairness.

There wasn't a dry eye among all the 200,000 when he declared — “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Do you think that any of us who were white didn't say “thanks” that our children have not had to suffer for the color of their skin?

And this is one of the reasons I went on that Washington March — because I knew, and so did the thousands of other whites that went, that discrimination against a person because of the color of his skin is a sin against God.

I went because I had to atone for myself and my people for not having tried harder 20 years ago to do more for our people when they were being murdered by the Nazis.

I went in the hope that the bigots of America would perhaps sense something of our spirit and open their eyes for even a moment, and thus open the way for their repentance.

I went because it was the right thing to do.

How much was accomplished that day in Washington? I don't know — perhaps a great deal, perhaps very little.

But I do know that the voice of responsible America spoke and I do know that the conscience

of America was shaken because a new Moses is leading the Negro people into their promised land and I am with him.

Amen