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In Memory of Martin Luther King, Jr.
April 5, 1968
Temple Israel
Omaha, Nebraska
Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks

"Some of us, of course, will die without having received the realization of freedom, but we must continue to sail our charted course. We must accept finite disappointments, but we must never lose infinite hope. Only in this way shall we live without the fatigue of bitterness and the drain of resentment."

(Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love, p. 83)

Once again our nation reels under the impact of a stupid, senseless, wild act of hostility. As a result, a good man, a peaceful man, a man of spirit and wisdom lies dead. All of us, especially those who advocate violence, are the poorer.

We like to think we live in an enlightened era. To be sure, we live in a technically sophisticated age. At such time there are important differences to be noted between success in technology and achievement in human relations.

If a Saturn rocket with its myriad of components fails to function properly, we can rebuild another and try again. However, when a man with all his infinite potential of body and mind and spirit is destroyed, there is no rebuilding. He cannot be duplicated. He shall not rise up again. The world shall no more see his equal.

That is why our rabbis say that "He who destroys a single life is regarded as if he had destroyed the whole world."

Martin Luther King, Jr. graced our world at a time of violence, war, riot, strife, hate and fear. His was a message of peace, calm and negotiation, love and hope. He was willing to suffer for those principles and, if need be--so he preached on the eve of his death--to die for them.

On another occasion he said, not in the context of a demonstration, but in the quiet of his sanctuary and from his pulpit:

"My personal trials have taught me the value of unmerited suffering ... Recognizing the necessity of suffering, I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transfigure myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive."

(p. 141)

In the sorrow and shame that fills the heart of decent, peace loving Americans tonight, there must be found some hope, some justification for the enduring quality of life brutally brought to an end that was not meant to be.

This is why I have read to you a few of the words of Martin Luther King--to show that men may be hurt, threatened, abused, degraded and killed. The ideas of men, the values of men, the long range hopes of men cannot be snuffed out.

The voice of Martin Luther King and the voices of so long a list of martyrs of all races, colors and creeds have been effectively silenced by the destruction of their lives. Still their ideas live on. Men do not forget how to read and to remember and to carry on.

We Jews ought to know that. How many powers and nations have sought to annihilate the People of Israel from Egypt to Egypt; from the Exodus to the Six Days War. Not a corner of the world does not hold the remains of those effectively silenced by hate. Yet the word endures!

As we worship tonight we pray for the soul of Martin Luther King that it may live on in us and that one day we shall all live in a world which shall not tolerate war and violence as a means of solving human differences and problems.

In memory of the most recently fallen of the world's most Peaceful men we recite--and let each of take to heart--the words of our memorial poem:

"These things do I remember: through all the years

Ignorance like a monster hath devoured

Our martyrs as in one long day of blood.

Rulers have arisen through the endless years

Oppressive, savage in their witless power

Filled with a futile thought: To make an end

Of that which God has cherished." Amen

(Union Prayer Book, Vol. II)