

From The Rabbi

Observing and celebrating special days throughout the year with unique, meaningful and significant experiences is a large part of what makes us who we are. Each special day on the calendar has the potential to provide nurturing and transformative opportunities. Both American and Jewish holidays help us to relive significant historical events, focus upon their meaning in the development of our identity and insure that certain values remain part of our contemporary lives. The Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur help us to direct our moral compass and nurture our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. Three American holidays: Columbus Day, Presidents' Birthday and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day help us to honor the memory of individuals, their accomplishments and their unique contributions to our identity and character as citizens of the United States of America.



Although a holiday might be observed, often, the meaning and the reason for the holiday can get obscured or even be ignored. For example, Chanukah is a holiday on which we are supposed to rejoice in the triumph of the Maccabees for religious and political freedom. It is a time to celebrate our Jewish pride and the miracle of God's illuminous presence in a dark time. When Chanukah becomes simply a time of eating latkes, spinning dreidels, lighting candles and getting presents without any reference to the reason for the celebration, the significance of the Chanukah celebration is greatly diminished. American holiday celebrations are notorious for losing their intended significance. For example, Memorial Day is supposed to be a day to remember and honor the brave men and women who have sacrificed their lives on behalf of our country. Instead, it has become the first official day of summer marked with picnics, barbeques, time at the beach and shopping for great Memorial Day bargains.

When I was living in Israel in 1983, I had the opportunity to observe Israeli Memorial Day and Israeli Independence Day. In Israel, these two days are observed in succession to remind us that there cannot be a celebration of independence without remembering and honoring those who sacrificed their lives for it. In observance of Memorial Day, I participated in a walk on the Burma road while reading passages from the book, O Jerusalem, about how that road was blocked off as part of a siege that was laid on Jerusalem during the War of Independence. The walk concluded with a visit to the military cemetery on Mount Herzl where we stood at the graves of people who had died in the battle for Israeli Independence. That night, as Israeli Independence Day began, I stood in Liberty Park amidst fireworks, the singing of HaTikvah which includes the words "to be a free people in our own land", and an intense and joyous celebration. When I returned to America, I vowed to make sure that all of my future celebrations of Memorial Day in America would include dedicating some time to remembering and honoring those who died fighting for the freedoms that we enjoy and to make sure that other significant days on the calendar would not pass without my participating in activities related to the significance of the day.

This month on January 18, there is a national American holiday in honor of the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This is another one of those holidays whose meaning is ignored by most Americans. It has become simply a day off from work or school without any time dedicated to the values or ideals for which Dr. King lived and died.

The following is quoted from the website of The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia.

The King Holiday should highlight remembrance and celebration and should encourage people everywhere to reflect on the principles of nonviolent social change and racial equality as espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr. It should be a day of community and humanitarian service, and interracial cooperation.

The King Holiday should be a day of which the majority of local and state governments close, and one on which private organizations and the majority of businesses honor Dr. King by encouraging their employees to undertake community service work to address social needs.

Mrs. Coretta Scott King is quoted as saying:

"As a nation chooses its heroes and heroines, a nation interprets its history and shapes its destiny. The commemoration of the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. can help America realize its true destiny as the global model for democracy, economic and social justice, and as the first nonviolent society in human history."

In October of 2015, the Black Jewish Coalition for Justice was incorporated. This is an organization comprised of Rabbis and Black Ministers from Nassau County who will be working together to reignite the relationship between Blacks and Jews within our community that flourished between members of the Jewish and Black communities during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. I am proud to include myself as a member of this coalition and will be attending a special interfaith Martin Luther King service in Freeport as part of my celebration of MLK Day. An announcement for this service is on the front page of this Temple Talk. If you are interested in making this service part of your MLK day observance, please contact me either by phone at 516-725-1906 or by email at Rabbi@lnjc.org.

This year let us all turn the observance of the MLK holiday into a transformative experience impacting upon who we are.

Rabbi Gordon Yaffe