

“Be The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Celebration”

**Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee
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My first words on behalf of all of us are, “Bless you, Mayor Wharton,” for reminding us that this holy day is not supposed to be a day OFF from our collective responsibility, but rather a day ON for community service. Throughout this day, in every corner of the U.S.A., Americans will commemorate and revisit the life and dream of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, King, Jr., but of the 317 million people living in America, only you – we - are sitting where King preached his last sermon, so my question for everyone here and everyone watching is this: *What are you willing to do to help realize the dream Dr. King preached on this very spot?* What are we willing to do to end the plague of poverty in a nation as rich as ours – that’s what he preached about on the last night of his life! What are we willing to do to promote the necessity of non-violence? What about pushing the power of education for every man, woman and child? THESE were the topics he preached about in this very place.

And as great an orator as King was, his dream wasn’t about words. For Rev. King, *you are what you do, not what you say.* That’s what it means to *bethe* dream, my friends, to live it and not just pay lip service to it. The sensational seven individuals we honor today happen to be my own role models and heroes, not for what they have said, but for what they have done, and THAT is what makes Rev. Kyles, Dr. Netters, Father Don, Judge Sugarmon, Fred Davis, Beverly Robertson and Jocie Wurzburg so worthy.

I did something crazy last week. I got on a plane and flew for 28 hours each way as part of the amazing initiative Memphian Alan Lightman and our city have partnered on - changing the world through the power of education and empowering a new generation of leaders with a model we helped set up in Southeast Asia’s poorest country, Cambodia. I brought three posters with me from the National Civil Rights Museum, one for the two leadership centers, and a third for the senior spiritual leader of Phnom Penh, the Buddhist Monk known as the Venerable Yos Hut Khemecaro. Yos Hut, a dear friend, was waiting for me in his Temple compound only steps away from where peaceful demonstrators had just been beaten and killed by military police shooting live ammunition into non-violent crowds - scenes reminiscent of Bull Connor and lynchings in the South. The poster I gave to Yos Hut is the quote I keep on my desk at Temple Israel– King’s quote on integrity which says, “When your character is built on a moral and spiritual foundation, your contagious way of life will influence millions.”

As I watched Yos this brave and courageous 66-year-old leader of millions read the poster, his eyes filled up. He looked up at me and in broken English with military police blocking what is called democracy square outside his Temple, the first words out of his mouth were, “I have a dream..I may not get there with you...” With tears in my eyes, I asked this friend from half-way around the world, how do you know those words? Because, he said, “when King gave that talk in the early sixties and died in your city in ‘68, it inspired me to act and speak up for those who have been suffering here in Cambodia.” My dear friends, I knew that Mason Temple, the Lorraine, and Memphis were focal points of inspiration for Mandela and South Africa, but I never knew that even in Cambodia where demonstrations are occurring right now for human rights, this holy ground of Memphis still motivates and influences the struggle for equality half-way around the world.

...“I may not get there with you...” One of my rabbis, Rev. Billy Kyles, has often noted how Dr. King softened that line on this pulpit 46 years ago. King had an intuition that he would never live to age 40. He died at 39. So rather than say I WILL not get to the promised land, he said, I MAY not get there with you - and, then, if you notice - he switched to the first person plural - I may not get there with you, but WE will get there...which leads to my closing story about a disciple who once visited his rabbi to ask him the benefit of praying, learning, mobilizing, and gathering with others, when some, including the student, were very content being alone. The day this student visited his rabbi, it happened to be a bitter cold day, unlike today’s unseasonably warm and wonderful temperature. The rabbi sat in his modest quarters gazing at a warm and roaring fire in the furnace. “Why” this disciple asked, “must I join with others in the cause? Why must I always serve through community? Why must I work with others, struggle with others, sacrifice with others, depend on others? Why can I not make a difference and please God all by myself in my faith without the constant reminder that I belong to a larger group?”

The rabbi said nothing. Several minutes passed, and still, the rabbi said nothing. He simply sat and stared into the tantalizing flames that danced in the fire. Finally, after what seemed like hours, the rabbi leaned forward, and still without speaking a word, reached into the fire with a pair of tongs and removed just one glowing piece of coal from the heap and set it aside. In a little more than a few seconds, the solitary coal ceased to glow. It burned out and perished.

The student nodded and understood the lesson. It was the same lesson King was teaching and is still teaching us. Alone we may think we are strong but together we are so much stronger. *Just because I may not get there with you does not mean that WE will not get there because we must.* Together. And not with solitary words but with tangible acts.

We can all become the dream but only if we feel responsible to each other, to God, and to the world that God has placed in our hands.

God keeps waiting for us, so let’s do it and *become* the dream.

Halleluyah, Halleluyah, Hal-le-lu-yah! Thank you very much.