

Unfulfilled Dreams

Kol Nidre 5783

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Almost every spring over the past decade I have spent time walking in the footsteps of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I have taken close to a thousand people with me across the age spectrum, from teenagers to the greatest generation. We've walked in the footsteps of the movement, in places like Selma, Atlanta, Birmingham and Montgomery. While we're there we're often reminded of and quoting the famous I Have A Dream speech, the speech so many of us know so well. But no one mentioned one of Dr. King's last sermons, called Unfulfilled Dreams. I Have a Dream has so much potential for what we **might** do, and Unfulfilled Dreams is a reminder of what we **can** do.

As Dr. King states: "So many of us in life start out building temples: temples of character, temples of justice, temples of peace. And so often we don't finish them... At so many points we start, we try, we set out to build our various temples. And I guess one of the great agonies of life is that we are constantly trying to finish that which is unfinishable... And so we, like [King] David, find ourselves in so many instances having to face the fact that our dreams are not fulfilled."¹

A month after he spoke these words, Dr. King was assassinated. He was killed in Memphis, trying to fulfill a dream. That dream, sadly, remains unachieved. He had so much left he wanted to do, but his life

¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/unfulfilled-dreams>

was cut short. His preaching feels prophetic: as if he knew that he wouldn't live to fulfill his dreams. Or, cynically, you could argue he's being a realist: that there is only so much we can do in this life.

Today we contemplate that we too will not fulfill all of our dreams. We don't like to think about that but we all know it is true. That when we leave this earth, there will be things unsaid, work undone, and a temple that we didn't have the chance to finish. As it says in the Ethics of our Ancestors "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it" (2:21) We have so much to do, and so little time to accomplish it.

Tonight also begins our annual dress rehearsal for death. We've given up what keeps us alive: food, drink, all that feeds our appetites and sustains our bodies, we dress in clothes we might be buried in, and consider what death might mean. In confronting death, we consider the meaning of our lives.

As we will read in our Torah tomorrow: "I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life, so that you and your descendants will live!" Judaism is a life-affirming tradition: our highest value is Pikuach Nefesh, that every life has infinite value, and that we must protect and preserve it. And yet, we accept death is a reality and that death means we will not achieve some of our dreams.

The same is true for those who have died, and I know many of us will be remembering throughout this holy day. One of the great disservices we do to our dead is pretending they fulfilled their dreams.

Pretending that they accomplished everything they wanted to do, thinking that their lives were complete. They too had a vision for our world that is as yet unrealized.

I laid my grandmother, Zelma Moss, to her eternal rest three years ago. In her eulogy, I reflected on how she fought to her last breath for her dreams. Over 60 years ago she joined the board of Planned Parenthood pushing for legalized birth control in what became the Supreme court case *Griswold v. State of Connecticut*, and volunteered there into her 90's. She pulled every woman in our family aside and told them she would help them get an abortion, no questions asked if they needed her. She started driving people to the polls decades ago, and continued past the point when she was a safe driver because she believed so strongly in the right to vote. She was trying, like David, like Dr. King, to build that Temple that would change the world. And throughout her life, if you asked her how it was going, she would first blame the "no good so and so's" for being obstructionist, bemoan the state of affairs, and then share the work she was doing. The last conversation I had with her of course began with her great grandsons, and ended with a consistent hope for how we might make our world better.

Zelma didn't have the soaring oratory of Dr. King, which she was lucky enough to hear at her home congregation sixty two years ago, but she has a dream. Even as she's gone I can't say it in any other tense than the present: her dream is as real and present to me as if she were standing here, the same way Dr. King's dream is here, present and a part

of our world. Dreams dissipate only when we stop trying to make them reality.

So tonight, I'm here to ask for your help in fulfilling her dream. We have so much work to do, but I want to share with you why I feel so passionately about one of her dreams: because I believe in the sacredness of life, and preserving life. I'm still shaken by the story of a woman whose water broke prematurely last May. She lives in Texas, a harbinger of what's to come in most of the United States. Her doctor told her that an abortion couldn't happen until it was a medical emergency, so she would have to wait until she was sick enough for them to preform the abortion, even though there was no chance the baby would survive, and she had to endure the cruel and unusual punishment of waiting to be sick enough for care.² In her words, it was a ... "dystopian nightmare" of "physical, emotional and mental anguish."³ This story is emblematic of what the New England Journal of Medicine is worried about when they said: "Restricting access to legal abortion care does not substantially reduce the number of procedures, but it dramatically reduces the number of safe procedures, resulting in increased morbidity and mortality."⁴

Our tradition is very clear that a fetus is not a person. Exodus states that "When men fight, and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible

² [Because of Texas abortion law, her wanted pregnancy became a medical nightmare](#)

³ *ibid*

⁴ <https://www.vox.com/2022/7/1/23180626/roe-dobbs-charts-impact-abortion-women-rights>

shall be fined.”⁵ This extends to Rabbinic tradition, in which a fetus is considered a part of the mother’s body until it is born,⁶ and that if the fetus actively endangers the mother’s life at any moment during the pregnancy before active labor, the mother’s life takes precedence.⁷ There is even a synagogue in Florida that has filed a lawsuit claiming that the new anti-Abortion legislation in Florida violates religious freedom.⁸ Our tradition does speak with many voices on this issue, but the loudest and most consistent one is that the life of the mother takes precedence over a fetus.

It is with that in mind that I’m appalled at the consistent suggestion that encouraging adoption is the right answer when we consider the number of women who will be forced to carry a baby to term. As you know, my son Ezra is adopted, and I am grateful every day that he is in our lives: and I can’t imagine how challenging it is for anyone to give up their child. As one anonymous mother put it:

“The suggestion that abortion isn’t needed because adoption is there makes it seem like this casual thing, like taking off a sweater and giving it to someone else and just forgetting about it or moving on...That’s not what it is. It’s this huge event that you do to yourself and your child and it changes you.”⁹

⁵ Exodus 21:22

⁶ Gittin 23b

⁷ Ohalot 7:6

⁸ [Florida's new abortion law violates religious freedom, a synagogue's lawsuit says](#)

⁹ [It's not as simple as abortion v. adoption. Just ask Bri](#)

Researchers have found that the trauma of relinquishing your child for adoption can stay with you for decades. It is not a light or easy decision, and to suggest that it is, feels callous and cold towards the women who have chosen to do so. As one person said to me on my adoption journey: could you ever imagine giving up your child? So why do you assume it's easy for anyone else?

My friends, if we care about women, if we care about their health, both their emotional health and physical health, if we know that one in four women have had abortions in their lives including some of the most important women in my life and I have no doubt many of yours, we have a moral responsibility to be like Zelma: to fight for this important cause. To ensure we vote our values in November, and push for legislation we believe in. To support organizations that are supporting women who are stuck with impossible choices at this moment, from NCJW, the National Council of Jewish Women, to Planned Parenthood to local organizations doing this life saving and life affirming work.

As Dr. King said: "And each of you...in some way is building some kind of temple...It gets very disenchanting sometimes...Well, that is the story of life.... You may not see it. The dream may not be fulfilled, but it's just good that you have a desire to bring it into reality."

I have my own unfulfilled dreams. And the dreams of my grandmother. And the dreams of my grandfather. Each of them is a temple unfinished, work as yet undone. Each time I go to Albany, Hartford, or DC to push for a more just society, each time I go with a

group to Selma to share the stories of the people who lived there, I'm working on unfinished dreams. Each time those unfulfilled dreams emerge we have a sacred opportunity: will we pick up the hard work they began? Because the dreams are still there: the temples remain unbuilt and we honor them when we continue the work they started instead of pretending they perfected it. Ani V'atah N'shaneh et ha olam: you and I can change the world.