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An American Tragedy
April 5, 1968

The assassination of President Kennedy occurred around lunchtime on a Friday, leaving little time to prepare a formal sermon in response to the psychological trauma of that event. The assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., coming on a Thursday night, left all of Friday—the day Saperstein generally devoted to preparing his Friday evening sermon—to formulate some reaction to the devastating shock and the almost paralyzing grief following the news that once again one of America's most gifted and inspiring leaders had been brutally cut down in his prime. As on the Friday night of November 23, 1963, Jews thronged to synagogues to be together, to vent inchoate feelings in rituals of mourning, to seek an articulation of what it all meant for them.

Not surprisingly, Saperstein drew from the personal experience we have encountered in two previous sermons, describing the "March on Washington" in August 1963 and the voter registration work in Alabama during the summer of 1965. It is a personal statement, of the kind that relies for its effectiveness upon bonds long established between rabbi and congregants, evoking experiences they may recall having heard recounted, now shared in a context where the optimism of the past has become painfully problematic. There is also an element of criticism: at one point, after asserting that many bigots in the South share the blame for this murder, the preacher suggests that there are those in the North, indeed in his own congregation, who harbor prejudice and share in the responsibility. Characteristically, however, the sermon turns to a note of comfort and reaffirmation of hope, in the theme that ideals and dreams transcend the limitations of a single human life, and can be perpetuated by others who continue their work.

I FELT COMPELLED TO CHANGE THE THEME OF MY SERMON TONIGHT. I had planned to talk on "The Passover Plot," a book dealing with a great tragedy that occurred in the land of Palestine almost 2,000 years ago.¹ Instead I shall speak of an American tragedy, which occurred in our land in the city of Memphis, Tennessee, last night—the murder of the Reverend Martin Luther King. I speak with shame and with sorrow, yet with hope.

I say first that I speak with shame. I want to be proud of my country. I like to think of America as symbolized by the Statue of Liberty, proclaiming, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."² I like to think of America as symbolized by Abraham Lincoln's "With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in."³ I like to think of America as that great outpouring of people of all religions and all races who gathered in Washington in the famous March in 1963 to affirm their dedication to the cause of human rights, human freedom, and human dignity.⁴ This is the America I love.

But there is another America that we do not like to acknowledge, but the reality of which forces itself upon us. What is it in America that makes for these outbursts of violence that fly in the face of all reason and negate the spirit of humanity? No monarch in England has died by violence in many centuries. In our national history of less than two hundred years, how many Presidents have died at the hands of assassins? We speak of America as the land of "liberty and justice for all." How many Americans, white and black, who stood up to make these ideals real have died at the hands of brutal bigots? With shame for my country, I add to their roster the name of Martin Luther King.

True, you may say that these acts are committed by individuals with perverted minds. But there must be something in the climate of our country of our country that encourages this kind of brutal, violent destruction. It was not only the hand of Lee Harvey Oswald that assassinated President Kennedy. It was the spirit of hatred and bigotry, which seethed through Dallas and other cities of our country, that gave impetus to that historic crime. It was not the sick mind of an unbalanced racist that conceived the murder of Dr. King. It was the deep, sometimes unspoken feeling on the part of many, not only in the South but in the North as well, which, however camouflaged, resents the liberation and the equality of their dark-skinned fellow citizens.

1. Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot: New Light on the History of Jesus* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1965), a provocative and controversial book arguing that Jesus contrived to be arrested and crucified, planning to fake his "death" so that he would be "resurrected" in fulfillment of messianic prophecy.

2. Compare the beginning of "I Lift My Lamp" from 1952, above.

3. Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, now readily accessible in William Safire, *Great Speeches in History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 441.

4. See above, "The American Dream, In Color," 1963.

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When we were down in Selma, Alabama in the summer of 1965,⁵ we saw this hatred and this lust for violence in the eyes of the men who followed our car with shotguns in the back window of theirs—one of them the man who barely a week later was to commit the cowardly murder of Jonathan Daniels, a brilliant, dedicated young seminary student, who was riding with us that day. We heard it in the bitter hatred in the voices of those who tried to run us down as we walked across the driveway of a motel, and as we jumped aside shouted at us, "Nigger lovers!" I sense it in the people who tell me, "I don't have anything against Negroes, but if they move in, property values are going to go down," or "I'm for equal rights, but they want to get it too fast. They're not ready for it."⁶

That summer in 1965, Marcia and I were with Stokely Carmichael, working on voter registration in Lowndes County, the toughest country in the South. Stokely wanted me to meet an old Negro preacher, now completely blind. The old preacher insisted that the only thing a bigot would respect is a gun, and the only way to meet force is by force. Stokely defended non-violence and insisted that the only thing force would prove was who had the bigger gun. The old preacher turned to me and asked, "Rabbi, are you one of those non-violent fellows?" I answered that while I admired the moral idealism of non-violence, there are times when you must stand up and defend yourself, citing the example of the Jews in Israel. And so we argued the issue.

What made Stokely change? What turned him into the advocate of violence and Black Power? Did Jonathan Daniels' brutal murder have something to do with it? And if I were to meet him now, what could I say to him in the face of this tragic event?⁷ When violence rears its head in the Negro world, is it not because we have failed to control or even to punish violence in the white world? It is part of the American tragedy that we kill our noblest sons.

I speak, secondly, with sorrow, because so much has been lost in the death of Martin Luther King. I heard him a number of times, but three stand out in my mind. One was at the Freedom March in Washington, to which I alluded before. There he spoke for the American people because his dream was the American dream. I heard him at the convention in 1963 at Chicago of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, where he gave the main address at the closing banquet. He could have given a fatuous talk about brotherhood, and made everyone feel self-satisfied. Instead, he stirred the conscience of the thousand delegates there, reminding them that civil rights are human rights, that the struggle for them is everybody's struggle, and their denial is everybody's guilt.

And I remember his talk at the closing meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Birmingham in August of 1965. We met Jon and Stokely there again. The audience there was largely Negro. Not long before, a bomb had been thrown into a church in Birmingham, and four little Negro children had

5. See above, "On the Freedom Trail in Alabama," 1965.

6. On this passage, see introduction.

7. Saperstein never did meet Carmichael again. He changed his name to Kwame Ture in 1968, and began to espouse militantly anti-Israel positions. He died on November 15, 1998.

been killed.⁸ Only a week before, the Voter Registration Bill had been passed in Congress, and we were heady with victory. It was a perfect opportunity for demagoguery. King could have appealed to his audience, roused their emotions—they were ready to respond to anything he said. Instead, he spoke about Vietnam. He pointed out that it diverted effort from the home tasks, but more important that it was a denial of basic moral principles. He spoke not just as a Negro leader, but as an American prophet.

Martin Luther King dared to apply his religious principles literally. Some of the more extremist elements in the Negro world condemned him as an Uncle Tom, which to them is the ultimate insult. They felt he was not militant enough. The fact is that Martin Luther King was extremely militant. His non-violence did not mean passive acceptance of wrong. He stood up fearlessly against discrimination, against denial of civil rights—for freedom and equality. And in this struggle he was attacked, and beaten, and jailed—but he insisted for himself and for his followers that they would not strike back. And on this basis, he won battle after battle: the right to sit in buses wherever there was a seat, the right to sit at lunch counters, the right to use municipal swimming pools, the right to attend public theaters.

Like Gandhi in India, non-violence became an example of the power of the spirit. But it works only where the people against whom you stand have a basic sense of humanity. It seemed to be working here. But now this comes—and one wonders. It was such a meaningless, destructive act. Martin Luther King was the leader of the forces of moderation in the Negro world. Men like him inspired hope that our problems could be solved without bloodshed. If his murderer had wanted to stimulate rioting and violence, he could not have chosen a more effective way.

Dr. King did not hold back. In a tragic hour in our community some weeks ago, I used a story by the South African novelist, Olive Schreiner, called, "The Artist's Secret." It tells of an artist whose work was distinguished by a strange shade of red: lifelike, pulsating. Others tried to copy it, without success. He went on painting picture after picture, all with that same glowing color. As time passed, he became pale and weak, but he continued relentlessly at his work. One night, he died. His colleagues searched his studio, hoping they might find the mystery of the Artist's Secret, but they found nothing. The author concludes, "If they had examined his body, they would have seen beneath his heart a fresh wound, now closed in death. He had been painting with his life's blood."⁹ Dr. Martin Luther King painted with his life's blood, giving his life for his cause. His loss is part of the tragedy and sorrow of America.

8. Saperstein misremembered the chronology here; the Birmingham church bombing occurred on Sunday, September 15, 1963 and he referred to it in his sermon following the assassination of President Kennedy.

9. This story was clearly a favorite with Saperstein, although he was careful not to over-use it. Compare the conclusion of his eulogy for Rabbi Stephen S. Wise above (1949), in which he refers back to his citing of the story in a tribute to his uncle and predecessor in Lynbrook, Rabbi Adolph Lasker (d. 1933).

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But finally, I speak tonight with hope. Like Anne Frank, who wrote, "Despite everything, I still believe that man is good at heart,"¹⁰ I say, despite everything, I still believe that the American dream is not a fantasy. It hurts so much to realize that he was only thirty-nine years old. Truly this is an example of an unfinished life. And yet is this not the destiny of all idealists? The great tasks of mankind are continuous—they must be carried on by generation after generation. Each advances the cause as far as time and strength permit, and then passes on, finding comfort in the realization that others will continue.

Was Abraham Lincoln's life unfinished?¹¹ He had spent four crucial years leading his country in a terrible war to preserve the Union and to emancipate the slaves. He died before he could see the fruits of his labors. Decades were to pass while his dream remained a dream. But whatever progress has been made in our day toward human equality is the continuation of the work of Abraham Lincoln.

Was the life of Theodor Herzl unfinished? For eight years, he burned himself out to gain a homeland for his people. He met bitter opposition from within and without. Finally he died [at the age of forty-four], his work unfinished. But the living State of Israel today is the continuation of the work of Theodor Herzl.

Was the life of Moses unfinished? Forty years he spent guiding his people in the wilderness. And then he died on the far shore, never privileged to set foot in the Promised Land, which was his goal. But wherever the Jewish faith and people live today, the spirit of Moses lives on with them.

Dr. King had a premonition of his death. Just the day before, in Memphis, he had said, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. [. . .] But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountaintop. And I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. [. . .] I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."¹²

The ancient Rabbis understood it when they said, *Lo alecha hamelacha ligmor, ve-aincha ben chorin lehibatel mimenu*, "It is not for you to complete the task. Yet you are not free to desist from it."¹³ He followed that principle. And so must we.¹⁴ If we are sincere in our outrage and sorrow at this murder, we must

10. Perhaps the most widely quoted statement from Anne Frank's *Diary*.

11. At this point, Saperstein reprises the final sentences of the 1963 Kennedy sermon, developing the well-known examples of unfinished tasks in the lives of great figures in our history.

12. The full text of King's final sermon, to which this passage is the conclusion, is now conveniently accessible in *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: The Library of America, 1999), 876–85.

13. M. Avot 2, 16.

14. In the typescript, there is an arrow drawn at this point to the following paragraph clearly written after original text was completed:

I remember in Jerusalem, the day the Old City was liberated [June 7, 1967]. We had gone down to the Mandelbaum Gate to welcome the returning soldiers. Then we came back to our building [the Hebrew Union College]

vindicate this life so tragically cut short by strengthening the cause of human love, of brotherhood, of equality and justice, of peace and goodwill, which he served with such utter dedication. This is the task. And this is our hope. If this task is to be stifled and this hope crushed by a bullet from a gun, then all is lost and America is lost—and it will not be worth saving. His dream must be our dream, and we must make that dream real. Let us hear it in his own words once again, as I heard it on that unforgettable day in Washington almost five years ago:

(TAPE RECORDING—I HAVE A DREAM)¹⁵

where the border police had been quartered with us during the fighting. It was a great and historic hour. Suddenly we realized that the five of us, all Americans, wanted to proclaim that we shared this time of destiny as Americans. As we came up the steps, almost instinctively, we reached out, grasped each other's hands, and entered the building singing, "We Shall Overcome." A song of the Civil Rights Movement, first made popular by the followers of Dr. Martin Luther King. Somehow we felt that this was the spirit of America, the expression of the eternal hope and faith of our country.

(On the visit to the Mandelbaum Gate, compare the 1967 sermon, above, at n. 9). Coming as something of a diversion at this point in the present sermon, I doubt that this passage would have actually been said from the pulpit; I suspect rather that Saperstein would have used the tighter conclusion as originally written.

15. Written this way in the typescript. The sermon obviously ended with King's words.

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