



A Mighty Stream

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One of the most memorable and impactful lines of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech" is his invocation of the prophet Amos (5:24): "...No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until *justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.*" Dr. King introduces the words of the prophet to close a section with the repeated refrain "We cannot be satisfied." Each repetition of the phrase describes a different oppression that Black Americans face, reaching its climax with Dr. King's charge that protest against injustice cannot rest until justice and righteousness are as prevalent and unambiguous as the mighty waters.

In the context of the speech, the metaphor is a poetic description of the goals for Dr. King's nonviolent movement. In its original context, in the words of Amos, however, the charge is far more radical:

Amos 5:18-20, 22-24	עמוס ה:יח-כ, כב-כד
¹⁸ Ah, you who wish for the day of Hashem! Why should you want the day of Hashem?	¹⁹ הו'י המתאונים את יום ה' למה תזה לכם יום ה'



It shall be darkness, not light!	הוא חֹשֶׁךְ וְלֹא אֹר:
¹⁹ As if someone were to run from a lion	¹⁹ כְּאִשֶּׁר יָנוּס אִישׁ מִפְּנֵי הָאֵרִי
and get attacked by a bear;	וּפִגְעוּ הַדָּב
Or, upon making it indoors, were to lean their hand on the wall	וּבָא הַבַּיִת וְסָמָךְ יָדוֹ עַל הַקִּיר
and get bitten by a snake!	וּנְשָׁכוּ הַנָּחָשׁ:
²⁰ Surely the day of Hashem shall be not light, but darkness...	²⁰ הֲלֹא חֹשֶׁךְ יוֹם ה' וְלֹא אֹר...
²² If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your grain offerings—I will not accept them;	²² כִּי אִם תַּעֲלוּ לִי עֹלוֹת
I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings.	וּמִנְחֹתֵיכֶם לֹא אֶרְצֶה
²³ Spare Me the sound of your hymns, and let Me not hear the music of your lutes.	וְשָׁלֵם מְרִיאֵיכֶם לֹא אֲבִיט:
²⁴ But let justice well up like water,	²³ הֲסִיר מֵעָלַי הַמּוֹן שְׁרִיר וְזִמְרֹת
Righteousness like an unfailing stream.	וְבָלִיר לֹא אֶשְׁמַע:
	²⁴ וַיִּגַּל כְּמַיִם מִשְׁפָּט
	וַיִּצְדָּקָה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן:

The prophet Amos tells the people of Israel that the redemption they are hoping for will in fact be a day of destruction, “darkness, not light”; rather than accepting their offerings, God will punish them with an overwhelming flow of justice. The “mighty stream” that Dr. King describes is, at least in its original context, not merely a hope for the future, but a threat, and a violent one at that. Set in the midst of the most famous speech of one of the most famous and influential ambassadors of nonviolent resistance, the verse sounds, to those who hear its original biblical echoes, distressingly out of place.

If we want to take Dr. King’s charge seriously in the full prophetic context, then, we have to understand it as one that calls for radical change.¹ Indeed, elsewhere in the speech, Dr. King

¹ Note that, in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written four months earlier, Dr. King also quotes Amos. Responding to white moderates who supported his goals but not his methods, calling him an extremist, Dr. King writes: “Was not Amos an extremist for justice?—*Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream....*” This very verse is an example not of Amos’s pollyannaish hope for a saccharine future in which everyone gets along, but to the contrary, evidence of the prophet’s extremism. Dr. King understood very clearly the meaning of the phrase and its implications.



invokes another prophet, Yeshayhu, to do just that:

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”

In its own biblical context (Isaiah 40:4-5), these words are the means to, “Clear in the desert a road for God! Level in the wilderness a highway for our God!”² We know that in order to build, one must sometimes tear down. This truism is even embedded in the laws of Shabbat, where one of the biblically forbidden labors is destroying “in order to build.”³ There are times when, in order to build the “road for God” one must make low the hills and mountains. This is a frightening truth, and one that Dr. King deliberately deploys.

Taking his message seriously, then, means understanding that sometimes, justice requires painful changes to society. But just as we must attend to the biblical context of these verses if we want to faithfully read “I Have a Dream,” we also cannot divorce Dr. King’s use of these verses from his larger commitment to nonviolence, an equally important context for a faithful reading. Holding both of these contexts in our heads and hearts means recognizing both that even radical change, when needed, must be nonviolent, and that even nonviolent resistance to oppression can be painful.

I also take guidance from a reading of Amos that I think is consonant with this nuanced understanding of systemic change and nonviolence. Although it is not the original meaning of the word in its biblical context, Jewish sources often read the word *tzedakah* (“righteousness”) as referring to an act of unmerited generosity or kindness. Thus, for

² קל ג'יא ינשא וכל הר וגבעה ישפלו והיה העקב למישור והרכסים לבקעה: ונגלה כבוד ה' וראו כל בשר יחדיו

³ See, for example, Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 10:15.



example, the Mareh Yehezkel,⁴ discussing the Amidah's blessing about justice, comments: "Treat us favorably in judgment (*ve-tzad'keinu ba-mishpat*), which implies that even though we are not deserving, God should perform *tzedakah* that is not demanded by the law (*lifnim mishurat ha-din*)."

Reading this connotation into the verse from Amos, we find a day on which "justice [will] well up like water, and unmerited generosity like an unfailing stream." On its face, this appears to be an internal contradiction. How can there be justice where there is unmerited generosity in judgment? Yet we know that this is always necessary. The strict letter of the law may call for painful consequences when society has dipped to oppressive lows, yet both the prayer for justice in the Amidah and this reading of the prophet Amos, ask that strict judgment be tempered by understanding and forgiveness. Neither is possible without the other—*mishpat* requires *tzedakah*, and *tzedakah* demands *mishpat*.

On this Martin Luther King Day, we pray that we, as God's servants, will do what we must to bring about justice, and that that justice will always be tempered with the same love for others that God shows us when God judges us mercifully. That is indeed, as Dr. King writes in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," an extremist position, in the most beautiful sense: demanding both justice and generosity, both *tzedakah* and *mishpat*.

⁴ R. Yehezkel Panet, 1783-1845.

