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Congregation B'nai Israel
Boca Raton, FL**

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EBENEZER 2010

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It is good to be together again. Twenty-six years in a row!

**There are not too many things in this world that have that long a streak going.
And praise be to the One G-d who brought us together and has kept us together.
Amen!**

**And on behalf of all of us at Congregation B'nai Israel,
know that our prayers are with our friends at Ebenezer
as this very special church goes through its period of transition.**

**I want to tell you that last year on MLK weekend I was in Washington DC
with our 11th-12th grade religious school students.**

**It was the weekend, you will remember, that we inaugurated the
44th President of the United States.**

**On Sunday, a year ago today, we attended the concert on the Mall
performed from the Lincoln Memorial
that featured stars from all over the entertainment world,
from Pete Seeger to Stevie Wonder to James Taylor to Mary J. Blige and more.
The next day, Monday, the official MLK Day, was a national day of service
and we worked together people from all over the country who had come
to be a part of history.**

**In soup kitchens, with the homeless, sending packages to the soldiers
and more. The kids did good work.**

Late in the afternoon, we visited the Lincoln Memorial itself.

It was very cold, and we had to stand on line for almost an hour.

But we waited—it was important for us to be there on this day of all days.

I mean if Abraham Lincoln could see his country now.

Finally we got to the front of the line.

**I was at the back of our group and right behind me was an
African-American mom and I'm guessing her 10-11 year old daughter
who was, to be honest, a bit whiny and cranky.**

**Anyway, as we go up the steps to the Memorial I'm overhearing the mom
trying to get her daughter enthusiastic again after the long wait in the cold.**

**"Just think," she says to her. "All the history that's taken place right here where
we are standing now." The daughter was still cranky.**

**But Mom wasn't giving up. "Hey," she said, "only yesterday,
Beyonce stood on these very same steps."**

No one ever said that teaching the next generation would be easy.

Inscribed in stone in the Lincoln Memorial are immortal words,

**"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent,
a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition
that all men are created equal."**

Those of course are the words with which Abraham Lincoln began the Gettysburg Address.

But four score and seven years earlier, it wasn't exactly as he described. America's Founders didn't really believe that all men were created equal. We know this because they did not extend equal rights to "all men." If you didn't own property or were female, Black, even Jewish, equality was a while in coming.

There has always been a distance between the American Ideal and the American Reality.

And the history of our nation has in significant measure been the history of our attempts to shorten that distance, To live with the reality, not just the platitude, not only that all men-women are created equal, but that we are "Endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these...life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Since July 4, 1776 many steps have been taken, both violently and peacefully, to bridge the gap between the American ideal and the American reality.

And just over a year ago we took as big a step as any.

An African-American man, Barack Hussein Obama, was elected President of the United States of America.

Let's set aside for the moment what it meant politically.

Historically, it meant that the distance between the American Ideal and the American reality was never shorter.

I was in New York City that Election Night.

I stayed with friends whose apartment overlooks the harbor.

You can see the Statue of Liberty from their living room window.

As it is with a lot of things that are part of our everyday landscape, we tend to take them for granted. I had been to their home many times so when I arrived, I took in the view and didn't think much more about it.

The morning after the Election when I woke up and looked again, it struck me.

The words on the Statue, the words of the Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Nothing is more symbolic of America than the Statue of Liberty.

Her promise, America's promise, is not only that you can come in, but that with brains and pluck and hard work and talent and decency and ideals, you too,

no matter where on the racial, economic, social or ethnic map you are, can grow up to be President.

And on that morning the Statue's Light and Truth were never brighter or truer.

In America anyone can grow up to be President because America's foundation is her ideals.

Other nations are established so a particular nationality, ethnic group, tribe or race can defend itself, hold power and prevail.

To hold high office or even to be a full citizen, you may need to be a member of that nationality, ethnic group, tribe or race.

That was never the American ideal.

As we've all been taught since we were school children,

America is for everyone. If you work hard you can enjoy the blessings of freedom and achieve anything you set your mind to.

This dream has been the source of America's greatness and strength.

Again, there has always been a gap between the dream and the reality.

But when the son of an African man from Kenya and a white woman

from Kansas, by the name of Barack Hussein Obama (no less)

is chosen by the voters to be President of the United States, it proves that the American Dream and Ideal are as real as they have ever been.

And it shows that Dr. King's dream,

that we not be judged by the color of our skin

but by the content of our character, had at least begun to come true.

We are always in the process, as President Lincoln said and

President Obama has quoted, of creating a more perfect Union.

And today, even after what might be called a difficult first year in office

it is still clear to the rest of the world

that America is as great a country as any on earth.

Not because we are a great military superpower

But because we are an even greater spiritual power.

We stand for and live by ideals and rights that are aspirations and inspirations for millions, even billions around the globe.

And for all of our serious issues and present troubles,

We can justly take pride in this.

This is the time when synagogues around the world

read from the Book of Exodus.

Exodus is the story that freed the ancient Hebrews led by Moses and

Exodus is the story that freed the modern African-Americans led by Dr. King.

Exodus has also inspired many people in between.

When the Founders of the United States of America

were considering the first seal for the new nation,

they nominated the image of the Children of Israel walking on dry land through the parted Sea—from Exodus.

Something else was ultimately chosen but the spirit of Exodus has always been a part of this great country.

Now Exodus is not an easy story.

Freedom to the ancient Hebrews did not come quickly.

Freedom to the ancient Hebrews came at a high price.

But freedom came, yes it did, because G-d wants all of his children to be free.

And not only free. In Exodus it is clear that

G-d is on the side of the oppressed, not the oppressor.

G-d is on the side of the powerless, not the powerful.

G-d is on the side of mercy, not cruelty.

G-d is on the side of justice, not discrimination or slavery.

That was a revolutionary message in the days of the Bible.

And it is no less so in our own day.

Because still, the powerful ones oppress.

Still, they subvert justice

Still, they exploit widow, orphan and stranger.

And more.

**But sometimes, just sometimes, we wish more often but sometimes
we see G-d's Truth and Plan move closer to reality.**

Fulfilling the vision of Dr. King and the vision of America:

Liberty, Justice and Opportunity for all.

We continue to work to make it real.

G-d bless our efforts and G-d bless America.