Bishop Hilliard, Pastor Hilliard, Reverend Rodgers, Reverend Barlow, Pastor Alston, Brown, Pastor Leach, Dr. Reid, Reverend Smallwood, Minister Santana, my pastor – Pastor Brown, esteemed dignitaries, and ladies and gentlemen of Cathedral International...Thank you for the opportunity to address your community on this esteemed holiday as we recommit ourselves in the name of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to let freedom ring from every mountain and molehill of our nation.

Desiring freedom is a pursuit of all people, yet we in the Jewish and Black communities share a unique heritage in this pursuit. Because for us, Let My People Go is not a platitude of hope, but a demand for redemption. Whether it be said to Pharaoh or to a slave master, שלח את עמי -- Let My People Go is an act of creative militancy that resonates in the heart of every Jewish and Black child. Let My People Go so that they may worship Me. Let my people go so they may live in My image. Let My People Go so they may be Free.

But when we proclaim that we are "free at last, free at last" what does that freedom look like? My grandmother once told me a unique and insightful definition of the ideal kind of freedom for a Jew in America. Freedom is the ability pursue your hopes and your dreams, to do anything you want to do as a Jew and as a human being...but there should be a little anti-semitism to keep us together as a people. Think about that for a moment. To be free as a Jew in this manner means to encounter some hatred for being a Jew. Why? Because encountering hate leads us to rely on each other and be wary of others.

Many of our traditions, from our food to our holidays, can be traced back to some encounter with anti-semitism. Before we celebrate the holiday of Let My People Go, of Passover, in April, Jews around the world will recount another moment in which we triumphed over hatred. The holiday of Purim, celebrated this year in the beginning of March, recounts the moment in which the Jews of Persia survived the attempts of the royal vizier Haman to destroy them. Esther, who was Jewish and married to the non-Jewish King Ahashverosh, used deft political skill to turn her husband against his number one advisor. Haman was destroyed but the Jews were saved, and one way we commemorate this triumph over antisemitism is to eat a three cornered pastry called hamantaschen which symbolically represents the three cornered hat worn by Haman or, according to one scholar, represents the dice used by Haman to determine the date the Jews would be destroyed. In other words, embedded within Jewish life are constant reminders that we have been hated and targeted throughout our existence, with the not so subtle hint that that hate is still there. We must always be on guard, to be not so removed from the potential of hate as to think it will not affect us. As we say during the Passover Seder, בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראת את עצמו כאלו הוא יצא ממצרים -- Each person in each each generation must view himself or herself as if he or she left Egypt. That is to say, if we can imagine the sweet taste of freedom, it is because the bitterness of slavery is also on our lips, and it is in sipping from both glasses of bitterness and sweetness that nourish us as a unique and special people.

So to further my grandmother's point, if swastikas are never graffiti'ed on synagogue doors, if kosher supermarkets in France aren't attacked, if there aren't moments in which we are reminded that we are "other," I wonder what would happen to the Jewish people? Would we eventually lose the distinctiveness born out of the pain of a five thousand year old trial of survival? And as a I stand here today before this holy congregation on this auspicious day I wonder..if the same question holds true for our Black brothers and sisters.

**May it be** in our day that no man or woman is pulled over or frisked or interrogated because of the color of their skin.

**May it be** in our day that no one shall steer their path to the other side of the street out of fear or ignorance.

**May it be** in our day that our prison populations be significantly reduced and reflect the true color and diversity of America.

**And may it be** in our day that all Americans, regardless of race, religion, or creed be judged by the merit of their effort and the content of their character.

But if there was no racism, if there was no struggle which people of color would have to overcome, if Dr. King's dream that all of God's children will hold hands together, I wonder...would the the Black community lose some of its unique distinctiveness?

I recently discovered a copy of a speech from my grandfather who marched with Dr. King in Birmingham. The speech was an introduction to Mr. Andrew Young, a former mayor of Atlanta and Civil Rights activist, who was set to address the Rabbinical Assembly of North America in March 1985. In his introduction to Mayor Young, my grandfather -- Rabbi Alexander Shapiro of South Orange NJ -- described a previous encounter with Mayor Young, Dr. King, and other civil rights activists of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when he and 17 other rabbis traveled to Birrmingham Alabama in the early 60s. "We came as Jews proclaiming our own faith, singular and unique," my grandfather said. "But a faith that meshed well with the faith of our Black brothers and sisters, very much preoccupied with parallels to their cause in the Hebrew Bible" [(Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly, March 1985)](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-ideas/cj/classics/1-4-12-civil-rights/proceedings/shapiro-future-black-jewish-relations-proceedings-1985.PDF%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). During their travels through Birmingham, the religious skullcaps known as yarmulkes or kippot adorned by the rabbis became in the eyes of their Black brothers and sisters, "freedom caps." And when Dr. King's father asked the rabbis if they would need passage to the Jewish area of Birmingham to secure kosher food, the rabbis responded "'Clearly, Dr. King, we have come to be with you, to be a part of your struggle; we will forgo our eating in a kosher establishment and instead eat only vegetables and eggs and salads, for our place is with you.'' It was an experience, like so many in the civil rights era, when Dr. King's dream of God's children holding hands together seemed less of a dream and more of an eventuality, forged through the fiery crucible of intolerance, racism, and hatred. It was an experience when the symbols of Jewish particularism, our diet and our dress, became enmeshed in the fabric of universal freedom.

But unlike our Black brothers and sisters whose skin color is a constant reminder of their particularism, of their unique identity, the symbols of Jewish identity can simply be...removed. Though we have many Jewish brothers and sisters who are black, brown, and yellow, it is a fact that most members of the American Jewish community can pass as White. Unlike a person of color, a Jew has a choice to wear a kippah or not, has a choice to display or share his or Jewish identity or not. And because a person of color cannot hide in plain sight, our struggle is not the same as yours.

**But if we hope** that one day the color of our skin will never be a judgment of our character…

**if we hope** that our children and our children's children will look past our outward differences… **if we truly hope** that all children can one day hold hands without any sense that they are NOT supposed to, then perhaps the Jewish experience of assimilation into White America can be instructive.

Over the past century, and especially over the last 50 years as Jews felt more acclimated to White American culture…

the Jewish hospitals **that** **used to** protect Jews from medical discrimination **today** serve every community in need…

Jewish Community Centers and other social institutions, like the former Young Man's Hebrew Association of Perth Amboy, **that used to** be designed to create a space where young and old Jews could breathe "Jewish" air, **today** openly welcome Gentile members…

and most significantly, **it used to be** that when a Jew married someone who was not Jewish it was seen as a betrayal to the people, **today** more than 50% of Jewish individuals are choosing to marry someone who is not Jewish and intermarriage is starting to become more accepted in mainstream Judaism.

**I do not know** if this story of the American Jewish community resonates with the Black community.

**I do not know** if you've seen a change in the makeup and support of your institutions.

**I do not know** if the choices of who you marry or who your children choose to marry is one of any concern…

but I imagine that it might resonate because our collective identities have been ironed through the fire of hatred and bigotry, and our desire for freedom is imbued with the spirit of Let My People Go.

**Let My People Go** so that they may worship Me.

**Let My People Go** so they may live in My image.

**Let My People Go** so they may be Truly Free.

Embedded within the redemptive spirit experienced by the rabbis and Black civil rights leaders of Birmingham was the belief that the achievement of that redemption would be the destruction of tyranny -- of racism, of hatred, of bigotry, of sexism, of anti-semitism -- and the creation of True Freedom in which one is Free to be one's true self. God needs no coercion to be worshiped, God simply needs our true love, because God IS love. The story of Haman and hamantaschen is not one of anti-semitism, but of faith in a mysterious, yet present God who could never forsake His people. And I believe, בכל לבבי, with all my heart, that God not only loves one people, but ALL people, and because God loves us God wants the hands of all people -- Black and White, Jewish and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic, Hindu and Muslim, Gay and Straight, Arab and Westerner -- to be linked together IN freedom WITHOUT FEAR OF FEAR. Because when hatred, and bigotry, and sexism, and racism, and anti-semitism, and all forms of discrimination are eradicated, our particular identities will remove the chains of hate that shaped us for the embrace of love that will free us. At that moment we will truly be able to sing FREE AT LAST! So in the words of my grandfather, "May He who created all of us bless the work of our hands and may it be His will that the great redemptive dream that we share become the reality of our world."