I’ve been a rabbi for close to fifteen years. There are days when I feel that I’m up to the task: days when I feel qualified to do my job, days when the skills I’ve developed match the tasks I’m addressing. And then there are days when it seems I’m tackling something that’s just far beyond me.

That’s how I feel—that’s how, I’m sure, many of my colleagues feel—when we sit ourselves down and try to preach about the topic I’m going to speak about this morning: the life—and the death—of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As those of us who remember Dr. King—and I realize that that number is growing smaller and smaller each day—can attest, he was many things. He was a political activist, he was a writer, he was an organizer. But above all else, he was a man who used his great skills as a preacher to energize, to electrify his audience. He, on the one hand, could speak to his flock, to encourage them, to strengthen them in their resolve to fight bigotry and prejudice. And on the other hand, he could and did speak truth to power. He confronted those who would deny equal rights to black men and women in this country with the power of the word. He inspired, he challenged, he chastened, he enlightened—and all through the power of his magnificent oratory.

A few years ago, around this time, I was exercising on a Nordic Track machine listening to the radio (that’s what people used to listen to before iPods were created) when the station began to broadcast first one, then another, and then another of Dr. King’s speeches. I was enthralled. I stayed on that machine far longer than I would have otherwise. This was “the word made flesh,” to borrow a metaphor from Dr. King’s religious tradition: Dr. King had this uncanny ability to take the images from the Bible, to take the stories from the Bible, and to make them come alive. That is the burden of the preacher, and that is what makes it so
difficult to speak about him on this day. For one is tempted to do what he did: to employ his rhetorical techniques, to speak in his cadences, to begin slowly and gradually develop one’s volume and one’s speed until the entire hall shakes with one’s message. But that would be imitating a great man; which isn’t the same as being one.

So I, and every other clergyperson who’s speaking about Dr. King this weekend—we’re feeling that our task—to do justice to the memory, to the legacy, of Dr. Martin Luther King—is fairly formidable. But we’ll just have to do our best, and hope for the best.

If there’s one message from the life of Dr. Martin Luther King that’s clearer to me now than it was during his lifetime, it is this: how quickly things can change. How much change one person, working together, of course, with many, many others, but still, one person who is willing to devote himself, fairly single-mindedly, to a supreme goal, who is willing to put his life on the line—how much such a person can accomplish in a few short years.

At the time of Dr. King’s death, there were major race riots in this country, and nobody was too surprised at that. Only four years earlier, the Voting Rights Act had been passed, and the other civil rights laws had been put on the books. There was still much work to be done. But when we compare it to today, it seems like another world.

I recently read a few essays by Alice Walker. You may know her as the author of The Color Purple, that powerful book about slavery in this country, which was made into a movie starring none other than Oprah Winfrey.

One of these essays is hard to get out of my mind. In it she talks about how she discovered once she was an adult that she had grown up living very close to the famous Southern writer, Flannery O’Connor. And so she decides to go back with her mother to visit the home they lived in and also the home that Flannery O’Connor lived in. The main thrust of the essay is a comparison between the two homes: that of Flannery O’Connor was, in fact, a mansion. Her own home, she realized only when she tried to find it with her mother on that trip, was a shack plunked down in the middle of a pasture. She grew up in a pasture!
But that’s not what grabbed me about that essay. In between visiting those two homes, she stopped for lunch with her mom at a Holiday Inn. And as the two of them sat there, eating their lunch, with a friendly, solicitous waitress bringing them their coffee, and with cheerful, lighthearted, polite conversation all around, she realized that eight years earlier—only eight years—she couldn’t have sat there with her mom in that restaurant. Because her skin was black and her mom’s skin was black, and black-skinned people couldn’t eat in that restaurant. Eight years. Think how short a time that is for a revolution—in thinking, in behaving, in law, in policy, in cultural values—to take place.

Now, sure, that revolution had been a long time coming, and there had been serious, deliberate steps all along the way. After all, the Civil War had been fought in the 1860’s. The Emancipation Proclamation freeing African-American slaves, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, promising equal rights to all men and women in this country no matter their race or color—those had been passed in the 1860’s. And yet, ninety years later, there were still separate schools in this country for black children and white children. There were separate seats on buses for blacks and whites; separate hotels, separate jobs, separate clubs—even separate water fountains in public places. And yet, form 1958 to 1968, ten short years during which Martin Luther King was active, all that changed. It was as if a veil had been removed from the eyes and an entire society came to see the light.

Think how young Dr. Martin Luther King was when he changed the course of this nation. Born in 1929, he was only 27 when he organized the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. He was only 34 when he spoke to several hundred thousand people in Washington during the summer of 1964. He was only 39 when he was assassinated in 1968.

In another of her essays, Alice Walker explains how she came to have her name. Not Alice, but Walker. That name, she explained, was in memory of her great-great-grandmother, who had walked all the way from to . A strong woman who lived to be 125. Alice Walker described the cemetery in which her great-great grandmother had been buried. Her grave marker had been made of wood, so it had long since disintegrated. So they didn’t know exactly where she’d been buried. But reflecting on that grave reminded her that, for the longest time, the only place that black people in this country could own property without fear that it was going to be
taken away from them was in a cemetery. Even Alice Walker’s grandfather, who’d actually been granted land by the federal government after the Civil War had seen it confiscated several years later.

What was it, Alice Walker asks, that Martin Luther King gave black people in this country. And the answer, she says, is a home. Prior to his day, black Americans were strangers in a strange land. By the time of his death—and surely during the 38 years since—blacks have come to feel much more at home in this country.

I just used the phrase “strangers in a strange land,” which is, of course, from the Bible. It’s a remarkable testimony to the power of the Bible. After all, descendants of West African tribesmen and women, for whom the Bible was not part of their cultural patrimony, were introduced to the Bible by Christian missionaries in this country, and were able to be inspired by its message. Maybe that’s not so surprising. The story of the Exodus, the story of the enslavement of a foreign people in the northeastern-most corner of Africa—and their subsequent release from bondage—resonated quite strongly with these descendants of men and women who’d been captured and chained and shackled and transported to this country in slave ships, and auctioned off at slave markets up and down the East Coast.

But to make these stories real took a man for whom they were real. To Martin Luther King, the Bible was a blueprint for revolution. It gave the principles that, if only the nation would adhere to, it could be redeemed. That was the secret of his success. It wasn’t that he was a skilled organizer—though he was. It wasn’t that it became clear to Southern political leaders that, for economic reasons they had to become a more enlightened society. It was that the system of discrimination in this country was wrong. The Bible was his proof. The Bible said it was wrong. It gave hope to those who suffered under it the system and it condemned those who perpetuated it.

A book can’t promote itself. That required a believer, an impassioned believer who took that book and made it speak. That was Martin Luther King.

Who would have believed it? That the man who was under investigation by J. Edgar Hoover, the man whose FBI dossier was as thick as that of any criminal in this country, would one day have a national holiday established in his memory?
Who would have imagined the colossal reversal in public consciousness in this country? We may not yet have a black president of the United States, but it is not unthinkable. We’ve had plenty of black mayors, governors, representatives and senators, and anyone who watches television can tell you that a black president is not far-fetched.

But are we there yet? Can we rest? Hardly. For Martin Luther King’s mission was broader than that of reversing a century of racial discrimination in this country. It was also an effort to highlight the scourge of poverty and that problem has only gotten worse. The economic stratification in this country is appalling. Shameful. Disgraceful. The longer we tolerate it, the longer we imagine that, so long as we protest the right to acquire wealth in this country, we don’t have to worry about anything else; the longer we imagine that political freedom is enough, and economic freedom is just another word for Communism; so long as we talk about Us and Them—we’re not being true to the book that was such a source of inspiration for Dr. Martin Luther King, the book that should be a source of inspiration for us, because it’s our book, the Hebrew Bible.

Martin Luther King left behind unfinished business. He was cut down by a sniper’s bullet far too young. There was more work to be done. What will be said of us? Will it be said that we lived lives of privilege and comfort? Will it be said that, well, since we conquered racial discrimination in this country, there’s nothing more to worry about? Or will it be said of us that we continued the struggle and that we, who’ve been blessed with life during these 38 years since the death of Martin Luther King—more years than the number of years he was blessed with life on this earth—that we too tried to make the world a more just and righteous place—and that we succeeded.

We may not be electrifying preachers, but there is much we can do—there is much we must do, to live up to the challenge Martin Luther King left behind.

Yehi zichro barukh. May his memory remain a blessing. May we, through our actions, keep him and his message bound up in the bonds of life.

Amen.