Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began publicly advocating the concept of the "Beloved Community" in 1956. Speaking to the First Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change in Montgomery, the young social activist explained for the first time how the idea of a "Beloved Community" was inextricably linked to a non-violent approach to societal change.

King told his listeners that he was deeply impressed by the theme the organizers selected for that First Annual Institute: "Freedom and Justice through Love." This theme, King observed, could serve as a roadmap that would lead humankind toward the establishment of the "Beloved Community." In other words, love was the pathway that would literally bring about social justice and the redemption of civilization. Although the basic purpose of non-violent resistance to injustice and oppression was to "awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor" and challenge the perpetrator's "false sense of superiority," the ultimate objective of non-violent protest on behalf of social change was, King declared, "reconciliation," "redemption," and "the creation of the beloved community."

According to King, the actualization of the "Beloved Community" required an unflagging commitment to the power of universal love. He believed that only true, pure, and genuine love could bring salvation to the world. This conviction was anchored in King's religious faith — his belief in the Christian concept of salvific "love." Yet to properly understand Dr. King's notion of the "Beloved Community," one must remember that King's thinking about the redemptive power of love was profoundly influenced by insights he gleaned from the teachings of faiths and philosophies beyond Christianity.

From Gandhi, a Hindu, King learned about the concept of satyagraha (love-force or truth-force). From Buddhism he developed his deeply felt commitment to the "interconnectedness of all beings." From the Greeks, King acquired his profound commitment to agape, which he understood to mean the power of transcendent love. From the principle stand taken by Socrates, King learned the transcendent power of civil disobedience.

Many people are unaware of King's interest in and appreciation for spiritual lessons emanating from non-Christian religious teachings. King, a Baptist minister, possessed a rare ability to appreciate the wisdom that flowed from religious faiths other than his own. Moreover, he gathered these teachings together into a bouquet which he presented to the world in his writings, his sermons, and his public addresses. The ultimate lesson he sought to impart — the teaching he referred to as "the order of the day" — was the urgent need to establish the "Beloved Community."

In his last volume, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (1967), King wrote: "A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies. . . . We can no longer afford to worship the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation . . . the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word."

King's unique and remarkable universal spirit — his "overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole" — is vividly documented in an inspiring exchange of letters preserved at the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, located on the historic Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion. On January 20, 1962, Dr. Samuel Newman (1881-1980) of Danville, Virginia wrote a letter to Dr.
King. Born in Warsaw, Poland, Newman was 19 years old when he immigrated to the U.S. in 1910, one of the millions of Eastern European Jews who fled the cruel bigotry of the Old World in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. With grit and brilliance, Newman educated himself, and eventually became a highly respected pediatrician who served underprivileged children in his adopted town.

Newman began his letter by explaining that he “sympathized” with Dr. King's advocacy for social change because “there is a striking similarity between the struggle of the Negro for justice and equality and the struggle of the Jew through the centuries for emancipation, which, as yet, has not been fully realized.” Newman noted that Dr. King derived “strength and idealism” from his deep Christian faith, “the essence of which you regard as love.” After this introduction, Newman reveals the primary purpose of his letter. He wanted to pose a very pointed question to Dr. King:

“I am asking your frank opinion whether you approve of the statement in the enclosed pamphlet issued by the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention: ‘At present there are more than 5,500,000 Jews in America. Our Baptist theology teaches us that they are lost without hope, without Jesus Christ as their Saviour.’

King responded to Newman without a particle of equivocation:

“My theological position has always led me to believe that God reveals himself in all of the great religions of the world, and no religion has an absolute monopoly on truth. One day, all Christians must come to see that ‘God has other sheep that are not of this fold’ – which, in this context means the Christian fold.

The Beloved Community about which King repeatedly spoke was a world wherein three interlocking “evils” – poverty, racism, and militarism – had been eradicated through a radical process of social change. The fact that powered the entire process of social change was universal love. This is what King meant when he wrote: “this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends... It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”

In the middle of the Torah – the Five Books of Moses – we come across one of the best-known aphorisms in all of our sacred literature: vahaveno ve’reicha kamocha – “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Leviticus 18:19). The Torah's message is very clear: we must learn to love and value all humankind just as we love and value our own lives. In order to achieve this objective, we must bear in mind – as Dr. King wrote to Dr. Newman – that “God [is revealed] in all of the great religions of the world, and no religion has an absolute monopoly on truth.”

One of the greatest sages in Jewish history, Rabbi Akiva, a scholar who lived in the 2nd century C.E., famously taught that the verse “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” was Judaism's foundational teaching. For Jews, this is also our pathway to the establishment of the “Beloved Community” – through a universal spirit of love. No doubt Rabbi Akiva would concur with the Reverend King's conviction that universal love is “the type of love that can transform opponents into friends... It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”

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