

Houston, Texas – “Go through this year with encouragement, not discouragement!” Reverend Dr. Marcus Cosby exhorted his flock on Sunday. “Be strong!”

“Yes! Praise the Lord!” shouted the congregants of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church as the band played and the choir belted out, “There will be glory” in praise of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. , who would be 87 years old today, had he not been assassinated on April 14, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee.

Accustomed to my rabbi’s calm, reserved manner, I was entranced by Reverend Cosby’s impassioned style of preaching. All eyes in the church were riveted to his face as he spoke. His energetic hand motions and powerful voice commanded attention. He had to stop periodically to wipe the sweat from his brow.

This was my first time inside a Baptist church. Yet, as the service progressed, I felt a sense of unity with the congregants. I realized that the message of Reverend Cosby’s sermon, “Be Strong!” was applicable to my life. I, too, face obstacles in my daily life, and Cosby’s message inspired us all.

I was electrified as I watched a video of Dr. King’s famous last speech, which was shown inside the church during the service.

“We aren’t gonna let any injunction turn us around!” Dr. King said the night before he was assassinated. “We’ve got some difficult days ahead...Like anybody I would like to live a long life...but I’m not concerned about that now,” he continued prophetically. “I’ve looked over and I’ve seen the promised land! I may not get there with you, but I want you to know...we as a people will get to the promised land!”

I was in Houston with J-Teen, a New York based, teen-led Jewish community service organization. The focus of our three day trip was to

help the community recover from the devastating effects of the Memorial Day floods of 2015.

We teamed up with Rebuilding Together Houston to repaint a war veteran's house and volunteered at the Church's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service. We prepared food packages with local Boy Scouts and members of the Church. The event also included a job fair to help the needy find employment.

After spending an hour packing food bags, I felt a sense of comradery with the people around me. "Hey, man, do we have any more oranges?" I asked a church member. Without missing a beat, he tossed an orange in my direction. As I deftly caught it, he added, "There are a couple of crates in the back." Together we pried open the crates and added some oranges to the food packages.

The bond I felt with the African-American community in Houston deepened as I recalled a bit of shared history.

During the Civil Rights movement, prominent Jewish leaders, such as Peter Geffen, the founder of the Heschel School in Manhattan, and Al Vorspan, the former director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism's Commission on Social Action, all marched with Dr. King in support of his dream for equality for people of all races.

It fills me with pride to think that the Jewish community commemorated that historic moment. We were proud to unite with the black community and one of its greatest leaders, and I know that we still share Dr. King's dream.