

(#11) Knew and Knew Not

Joseph and his brothers are the first people introduced in Exodus (1:1-5). Trouble followed when a new Pharaoh arose “who did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8; #2 and #3 above). We just learned that the *Yisrael-ites* honor a promise to carry Joseph’s bones with them across the Sea of Reeds (Ex 13:19, #7). Clearly, Joseph’s story is an important prelude, and part of, the Exodus tale. His story is also long and complex, the longest in Genesis, dominating chapters 37-50 and closing out the book. “The ABCs of Slavery,” the Joseph chapter in *Dick Gregory’s Bible Tales with Commentary*, captures a few of the essentials.

Gregory (see box) begins his commentary with notes on dreamers and dreaming:

Joseph found out it's dangerous to be a dreamer. Just like Joseph's brothers, society today has three ways of dealing with dreamers. Kill the dreamer. Throw the dreamer in jail (the contemporary "cisterns" in our society). Or sell the dreamer into slavery; purchase the dream with foundation grants or government deals, until the dreamer becomes enslaved to controlling financial or governmental interests. Society tries to buy off the dream and lull the dreamer to sleep. It's called a "lull-a-buy."

-- *Dick Gregory's Bible Tales*, p.70

In this 1974 publication, Gregory goes on to say that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “experienced all the ways society tries to deal with dreamers,” concluding: “Dreamers can be killed. Dreams live on.”

Gregory then shifts to a more racially explicit perspective, suggesting that “maybe Joseph was a Black cat.” He continues, regarding Joseph’s incarceration and interpretation of dreams for fellow inmates (Gen 40):

The butler in the Joseph story symbolizes America’s treatment of Black folks. The butler used Joseph’s talent as an interpreter of dreams and he promised to tell Pharaoh about Joseph. As soon as the butler got himself comfortably back in Pharaoh’s palace, he forgot about his word to Joseph.

America was built on the sweat, toil, and talent of Black folks. But when the work was done and the talent utilized, America quickly forgot its debt to Blacks. Black folks helped lay down the railroad tracks, but they could only work as porters after the trains started running. Black slaves picked the cotton, but the garment industry belonged to white folks.

-- *Dick Gregory’s Bible Tales*, p.73

Dick Gregory

Dick Gregory (1932-2017) was an author, comedian, civil rights leader, health educator, activist, and mentor for decades. He ran for mayor of Chicago in 1967 and for U.S. president, on the Peace and Freedom ticket, in 1968. Ally to Martin Luther King Jr. in life, Gregory spent years, following MLK’s death, pursuing facts about the assassination and cover-up.

Among his writings, *Bible Tales* is an often neglected treasure. Dick Gregory’s *Bible Tales with Commentary*, James R. McGraw, ed. NY: Stein and Day, 1974.

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Today, as in 1974, readers of many backgrounds can relate to a system that tries to destroy dreams by attacking dreamers. Then, as now, readers of many backgrounds can relate to feeling ill-used in ways resembling the experiences Gregory describes in the second quoted passage.

It is crucial to notice a difference in the two passages:

In the first quoted passage, Gregory introduces MLK into the story without explicit reference to race. This is notable

within the context of this book in that most other mentions of King highlight his Blackness, while this passage portrays the leader more generally as a dreamer who treaded in dangerous political territory.

In the second passage quoted, Gregory specifically references experiences of Black people enslaved in the U.S. and their descendants. For some readers this is direct lived experience. For some it is not.

All readers must be careful to recognize what we know and don't know:

- Each generation must see ourselves as though we actually left *Mitzrayim*, but that experience alone will not make all of us first-hand experts on topics like "America's treatment of Black folks."
- We must carefully distinguish between learning about others' experiences, on the one hand, which is crucial and important, and mistaking it for our own, on the other.



Dick Gregory in DC

Gregory was active for decades in the DC area, where his daughter, Ayanna Gregory, is an artist and educator. He was mentor to many, including members of CRD-1. Gregory supported Kymone Freeman's organizing of Black LuvFest, for example, and the founding of We Act Radio, where he was interviewed at length in later years.

His six-hour funeral, in Landover, MD, included celebrity tributes, remarks from local and national government figures as well as just a tiny number of the people whose lives he touched.

Photo (left): Dick Gregory, squinting in the sun at Black LuvFest, 2017.

Sefira: Counting Days & Weeks/Marking the Journey

How do we learn from one another's experiences
without mistaking that sharing with our own experience?

How can we discuss the Exodus
without confusing ritual understanding with contemporary oppression?

After nightfall, see Appendix and note --
Yesterday we counted ten.