

Pursuing Racial Justice

Sermon for the morning of Rosh HaShanah 5780 – Day 1

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

Fifty-five years ago, as the rabbis of the Reform movement were gathering for their annual convention, they received an urgent telegram. Hastily written from inside a jail cell, it contained a message from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was leading a protest in St. Augustine, Florida, to desegregate the Monson Motor Lodge, and was in need of support. So he turned to his friends of the Reform movement, and called upon our rabbis to come to Florida and join the protest, to bear “prophetic witness against the social evils of our time.”

Sixteen rabbis and one communal leader answered the call and made their way to St. Augustine. They included some of the most prominent leaders and thinkers of our movement, and we bid farewell to two, Al Vorspan and Rabbi Richard Levy, during this past year. Not surprisingly they were arrested for their acts of civil disobedience, and crammed into a jail cell. While there, they stripped down to their underwear to withstand the heat and humidity, and wrote a manifesto, *Why We Went*. “We came because we realized that injustice in St. Augustine, as anywhere else, diminishes the humanity of each of us,” they wrote. “We came because we could not stand silently by our brother’s blood... We came because we know that second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man’s capacity to act.” The next year, other rabbis joined Dr. King for the March on Selma, when Abraham Joshua Heschel famously noted that as he marched he felt as if he was praying with his feet. Two generations ago, the leaders of our movement and of our American Jewish community risked life and limb to stand up for what they knew was a moral evil of their time, to stand with, behind, and amongst the black community to call for racial equality and justice.

When I think or talk about racial disparities, I get a knot in my stomach. Part of that knot is the anxiety of knowing that talking about race, talking about money, talking about what people have and what people don’t have makes everyone uncomfortable. It’s not, as my grandmother would say, “polite conversation.” When I say the words “white privilege,” I’m worried that you might tune me out. It makes

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people defensive- “I worked hard for what I have.” I want you to know that, yes you did. But what I want to talk with you about is not about what you have done or what I have done as individuals, or what we have done together. The inequality is not in the effort put in; it’s in the outcome that results from it. And that is the other part of that knot, the deep sense of unfairness that remains even to today.

This past August 20 marked the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved people on our shores. Thus the seeds of our nation’s mistreatment of our black population were sown in the beginnings of America. This legacy of enslavement and racial mistreatment is foundational to the American story. Over the past 400 years, our nation has been in a tug of war for racial justice. With a sweeping look from 1619 to today, we see a progression in the treatment of black Americans from slavery to freedom and legal equality. But the legal freedoms afforded to black Americans were was overpowered by the threats of lynching and by the Jim Crow laws of segregation and humiliation. To help confront that injustice, Dr. King called upon us, the Jewish people, to support him and his community.

Why did Dr. King call on the rabbis? Because by the middle of the 1960s, the Jewish community had the power to affect change. With symbolic significance, by calling on rabbis to join Christian clergy, Dr. King recognized that our people were part of the population who had power and influence. That in racially segregated America, Jews were white.

It wasn’t always that way. We know of the restricted neighborhoods and country clubs, universities and hospitals. Of the embarrassment and shame of signs that said “No Jews allowed,” often alongside “No Blacks” or “No Dogs.” But the Jewish experience began to change in the years after World War II. While serving in our armed forces, white Christian Americans met their first Jew, and they put their lives on the line for each other. When the GIs came back home, many left the antisemitism of their youth behind. From there the GI Bill sent us to college and up the ladder of economic prosperity. It was then that we finally

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found our acceptance, and the restrictions of so many communities, universities, hospitals, and other institutions began to recede. As we made our way out to the suburbs, into the country clubs and medical schools, boards of non-profits and museums, we became, essentially, white.

Unfortunately, the black soldiers did not have that same experience. Many fought in segregated units. In the South, they couldn't vote. After having gone to segregated, separate and unequal elementary and high schools, they were denied admission to public universities, blocked from one of the core benefits of the GI Bill. The low-interest mortgages the GI Bill provided were blocked as well. The practice of redlining prevented black families from amassing wealth through real estate in the ways that the white middle class has been historically able to do. While white suburban homes appreciated in value, black homes in black neighborhoods had their values depressed by the practice of redlining. While the post-war era meant endless opportunities for Jews, for the black community it became just another iteration of the discrimination that had been going on for centuries.

I'll share with you a story of one family who rode the wave of opportunity to success, my family's story. It started with my immigrant great-grandparents, who had their children during the Depression. My grandparents were raised on Chicago's West Side. In the 50's they moved to Skokie, Illinois, following the wave to the suburbs. My grandfather had a furniture store, and my father was the first in his family to go to college, the local state university. Then he put himself through medical school. My mom is the daughter of a successful local business owner, who has spent the entirety of her adult life working in dentistry and oral surgery. I was raised in one of the most affluent suburbs of Chicago. We went to public schools that had small class sizes, with art, music, and PE programs. The high school had dozens of athletic teams and after school clubs. My debate team travelled the country to compete in tournaments, the cost of almost all of which was covered by the school's budget. The counselling department was dedicated to every single student in the school being accepted into college. In my family, it wasn't a question if we were going to

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college, it was a question of where. I wasn't asked to worry about how we would pay for it, so I chose Boston University, only one of the most expensive schools in the country. The partial scholarship helped. But when I made that decision, my school added my name to the list they hung up in one of the main hallways, with each graduating senior's name and the college they would be attending. At BU I worked hard, got good grades. When I got into a little bit of trouble, all it took was a few shekels and a little stress, and everyone moved on. I graduated cum laude, and was able to support myself (with some help from my parents) with an interesting but low paying job, and then six years of graduate school. I didn't have to worry too much about expenses; I had access to student loans and paid internships. Since my ordination, I have been privileged to work at one of the most dynamic and thriving congregations in the country. I can support my wife and three children, and this past year we checked that final box in the adulthood checklist and bought a house. I've made my way here through affluent schools, access to the people and contacts to put me in the place to succeed. We've paid for it through income and wealth amassed over the generations, driven by higher education and home ownership.

When I think back about that list of high school seniors and their colleges, I remember something else. I remember that of the 426 students in my graduating class, only one was black.

That wasn't in a time of segregation, wasn't in a time of redlining. It was two generations later. But the generational effects of those policies remain. To this day, the median wealth of a black family is just under \$18,000, just one tenth of the median white family's. The connection between race and economics, between white privilege and economic privilege, while not absolute, could not be more real. It no surprise then, that Dr. King saw poverty as the starkest symptom of racial inequality. What is difficult to tolerate is that fifty years later, his observations remain true.

It goes beyond just economics. It's also in the day to day experiences that each of us have, and the differences of those experiences depending on the color of our skin. If I walk into Nordstrom, I am greeted

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with a smile from the sales staff and a “may I help you?” Many in the black community would tell of a different experience: feeling the eyes of the salespeople, the managers, and the security guards watching their every move, signaling that they were a threat. It’s the phone call made to 911 when a white woman sees an 8-year-old black girl selling bottles of water, and reports her for not having a proper permit. It’s the Caucasian skin-toned band-aids in each and every box, and the special “ethnic hair care” section at the drug store, signaling that white is normal and black or brown is not. It’s in our judicial system that penalizes crack cocaine, predominantly used by blacks, more harshly than power cocaine, predominately used by whites, which has resulted in a prison population that skews black and brown, while white Americans commit the majority of crimes.

Perhaps the most difficult example of white privilege to discuss is the disparity in policing. Our law enforcement officers bravely put their lives on the line every single day, to make our communities as safe and secure as possible. But from time to time, in episodes that occasionally make national headlines, the decisions of a single or small number of officers are questionable. What brings me hope is that we see police departments all around the country engaging in implicit bias and other trainings, with the goal of reducing the number of racially-charged incidents involving our bravest and finest. However, we also cannot deny a reality when it presents itself. A reality like “the talk” that grandparents, parents, or older siblings of black children have to have with their kin, about how to behave when they get pulled over. Here are a few examples: “He is going to turn into a large, scary black man. That’s not who he is, but that’s how we will be perceived,” one mother noted. “I get so frustrated and angry for having to prepare my kids for something that they are not responsible for,” another said. “These are conversations that people of other races do not have to have with their children,” a third said, and then she warned, “Make sure your hands are out of your pockets, so they can see.” “In America, because of your skin color, we are going to be dealing with a lot of danger,” a father told his son.ⁱ

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The next chapter in the story of race in our country, after slavery, violence, and legal segregation, is the chapter we are living in now, the chapter of white privilege. It's the chapter in which according to the law everyone is the equal. It's the chapter when blatant acts of racism- in public policy, in educational practices, in policing, in art and culture- are both forbidden and not tolerated. No more separate but equal, and no more Archie Bunker either. But it's the latest chapter in the continuing story of how white and black Americans live different realities, live different truths, based on the color of their skin. The great challenge in recognizing white privilege is that it is so elemental to our lives that we barely notice it. Living with privilege has often been described as being like a fish who lives in water. The fish doesn't even know that it is in water; it would take being removed from it for the fish to realize how it's been sustaining itself all along. It is evidenced by the things that we take for granted, the things that we think of as normal. It's only when we learn that for others of other skin tones, these enjoyments are no where to be found, that we become aware of the privilege that we have.

In my heart of hearts, I know that just as a fluke of my fortuitous birth, I was born to a white Jewish family in 1983. If I had been born on the same day at the same hospital to a black family, the opportunities I would have had afforded to me probably would have been very, very different. The truth is, we all have challenges in this world. But should they be because of the color of our skin?

Our tradition teaches that humanity began with a single human being, so that no one could say, "My ancestor is greater than yours." It teaches that when G-d gathered up earth to make that first human being, G-d gathered soil from the four corners of the earth- yellow clay and white sand, black loam and red soil," to teach us that we are created as equals, equal in our humanity, in our dignity, and in our divinity.ⁱⁱ Encapsulated in that midrash is the expectation that when we see inequality, we need to address it. It was true during the time of the rabbis, it was true during the Civil Rights Era, and it remains true today. Dr. King taught that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards the light. I'm not sure I have as

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much faith as he did. I think we need to do more than wait for that arc to bend, we need to get to work and bend it.

In fighting for racial justice, I am inspired by one of our famous teachings, “Do not judge someone until you have stood in his place.”ⁱⁱⁱ As Jewish Americans, our community is predominantly white. In past generations we built relationship with communities of color, to know and understand where they stood. We have demonstrated solidarity and activism side by side. Over the years that relationship has withered. It is time to reenergize it. We need to get to know our neighbors of color in real and personal ways, not just through the stories on the news or a passing hello on the street. We need to recognize that Jews of color now are a significant portion of the Jewish community, some say as high as 30%. We need to challenge ourselves to get out of our comfort zones, and allow ourselves to have our assumptions challenged in the process. We need to, with open minds, read books, watch movies, and hear stories from people of color who honestly and openly share their experience. That will get us part of the way there. But we cannot do it alone. A few weeks ago, on a rabbinic visit to the Deep South, I learned a phrase that is common in justice efforts: “Nothing about us without us.” We, as white Jews, cannot lead the fight for racial justice. We must enter it in relationship with those who have been the victims of injustice and fight with and for them. It’s important that we have a Martin Luther King Day with the town’s black churches, but it’s not enough. It doesn’t give us the opportunity to hear their stories, to learn how we can work together to make a world that is more fair and just. In a time when hatred and divisiveness is rising, we need lean on each other and support each other now more than ever.

When we hear the cries of the shofar, it shakes us out of our comfort and complacency. It is a wake up call to the ills of the world, and our responsibility and opportunity to address them. So as we rise now to hear the calls of the shofar, may we stand up ready to work for a world that is more deeply steeped in justice for all.

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Shana Tova, may this new year bring a renewed sense of goodness and peace.

ⁱ Quotations from *The New York Times* Op-Doc “A Conversation with my Black Son,” from March 18, 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXgfX1y60Gw>.

ⁱⁱ Citations from Sanhedrin 73a and Yalkut Shimoni, based on an essay by Rabbi Judith Schindler in *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pirkei Avot 2:4.