

“IF NOT NOW, WHEN”
Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon
October 3, 2016 - 1 Tishri 5777
Rabbi Daniel Treiser

Day 1, July 25: It seems like we are in the middle of nowhere, but in fact, we are somewhere very real. 72 Jewish teens and counselors, the oldest unit from Camp Coleman, are with me in Whitwell, TN., at the local Middle School. My guess is that we’ve now brought the entire Jewish population of Whitwell to... 73. There are no Jews in the school, I don’t believe there are any Jews in the town. But this is the place where, 18 years ago, two teachers inspired their students to grasp the enormity of the number 6 million, the number of Jews who perished in the Shoah. This is where the children collected paper clips, first 6 million, then 11 million to include the other groups exterminated by the Nazis, and now the collection stands at over 50 million paperclips. The teens gather into a German rail car used to transport Jews to their deaths in World War II that now houses the collection, and they hear the story.

They pass the memorial to the 1.5 million children who perished in the Shoah on their way to a discussion with their counselors about what they mean when they say the words “Never Again.” Is it “Never Again” just for them, “Never Again” just for Jews, or is it “Never Again” for anyone to suffer indignity, hatred and oppression because of the circumstances of their birth: their gender, their skin color, their sexual orientation, their nationality, their beliefs?

Day 2, July 26: You know those people you meet who seem larger than they really are? Joanne Bland is one of those people. She’s shorter than I am, probably no more than 5’5”. But when she talks, I listen. Ms. Bland tells me to get the teens seated, so

I quickly get stragglers into chairs at the McRae- Gaines Learning Center. Ms. Bland wants to start, so I quiet them down. She turns to me and says, “Well Rabbi? Aren’t you going to have them say ‘Grace’?” “Yes, ma’am” I reply and hastily start the Motzi. After hosting us to a wonderful Southern lunch, (and getting a few more “yes, ma’am”s out of me,) Ms. Bland quiets the teens and introduces us to her sister Linda Lowry. And then, they start to tell us their story, the story of growing up in the George Washington Carver housing project here in Selma, Alabama in the late 50s.

They talk about the racism they experienced, the outright hatred of little black girls in their hometown. Dragged by their grandmother to the early meetings to plan protests for civil rights in the South with the Dallas County Voters’ League, and mass meetings at church, they learned at the feet of the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. They embraced Dr. King’s principles of non-violent protest. By the time she was 15, Ms. Lowry had been arrested 9 times for participating in sit-ins. On March 7, 1965, Bloody Sunday, Ms. Bland and Ms. Lowry, just 11 and 15 years old, found themselves in the maelstrom of violence unleashed against the protestors by Alabama State troopers. The girls were separated and Ms. Lowry feared that her younger sister had been killed, and she almost gave up. They were reunited, and their shared determination led them to be a part of the march just two weeks later down Highway 80 from Selma to Montgomery, AL., demanding the right to vote. The campers sat in silence, absorbing these eyewitness accounts to history. At the conclusion they shared questions, tears and hugs.

And then Ms. Bland took our buses to the outskirts of Selma. She had them line up.

Two by two, hand in hand, the teens walked over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The bridge named, ironically, for a general in the Confederate army and a grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. The bridge where the troopers beat peaceful protestors on Bloody Sunday. The bridge from which, just two weeks after Bloody Sunday, Dr. King would famously march linked arm in arm with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, now Congressman John Lewis and other civil rights leaders, gathering a crowd of over 25,000 along the way to the state capital. It was from that bridge, and the marching feet of men, women and children like Ms. Bland and Ms. Lowry, that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was born.

The teens had just followed in their footsteps.

Day 3, July 27: I find a seat on the stool with my hands resting on the counter in front of me. With eyes closed, I listen to the voice speaking soft and calmly in the headphones I’m wearing,

“How you doing?... This your first time, right?.. So far, so good... Nice and calm. You’ll be alright... Just stay calm.”

I hear some hooting and shouting behind me, but coming closer. Then I hear a different voice in one ear:

“You on that stool? You gonna sit down there the whole day? Oh, this gonna be fun.”

In the other ear, “Get up!” (A slap on the table),

“Get up!” (Another slap on the table),

“Get up!” (my chair is kicked)

Another voice, “If you don’t get up, boy, I’m gonna kill you. Right in front of everybody! I’m gonna take this fork, I’m gonna jam it right into your neck.”

Chaos erupts all around me; dishes break, glasses clank, silverware falls on floor, the agitators laugh and jeer.

“Oh, he still ugly though, eh? Ain't he ugly?”

I hear a shirt rip next to me. More dishes break. Someone is punched near me, someone kicks my stool. “Kill him! Teach him a lesson!”

(A growling voice:) “You hear that, boy? (heavy breathing) That’s gonna be you, boy, if you don’t leave now!”

“Kill him! Kill him!” (thump the table)

“Get up!” (Thump)

“Kick him. Kill him!” “Get up” (kick)

I hear a police siren coming from the distance, then a female voice calmly explains

“What you've just experienced was created to honor the brave men and women who participated in the American civil rights sit-in movement.”¹

I walk away, shaken by the experience of the Lunch Counter sit-in simulation, less than two minutes long, but impactful still today.

I comfort some teens who are also visibly upset by the experience, until I know they’re ok. Together we walk through the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. We’ve walked past ancient black & white TVs blaring images of

¹ Text taken from a transcript of the Lunch Counter simulation sent to me by the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Atlanta GA

Bull Connor, George Wallace, Strom Thurmond and other segregationists speaking about the “negro problem”, and are in a bright white rotunda, one wall filled with video screens. We watch as thousands of people, every age and every color, march on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. We hear them singing “We Shall Overcome.” We listen to the famous words of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. But off on the side, I tell them to pick up the receivers, so we can also listen to Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who ascended the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that day and spoke right before Dr. King, where he said”

“When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder. America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America.”²

How could I not leave here stirred to act?

Day 4: September 6th. I’m in Washington, DC, at the offices of Religious Action Center, the Social Justice arm of the Reform movement. It was in this same space, 51 years earlier in the aftermath of the march from Selma, that the Voting Rights Act was drafted and prepared for Congress before being signed by President Johnson.

² <http://www.joachimprinz.com/civilrights.htm>

The same voting act that was eviscerated by the Supreme Court in 2013.

Today, though, I’m at a study program with Dr. Jonathan Cohen, professor of Talmud at Hebrew Union College. He is guiding 40 rabbis through challenging texts of Talmud and Midrash, confronting Judaism’s view of the Cushite: the African, the dark-skinned other. In some texts they are viewed as the lowest of the low, idol worshippers, ignorant fools. And yet in others they are held in the highest regard: Moses’ wife is a Cushite, the prophet Zechariah is a Cushite, even King Saul, and by extension his descendant Mordechai of the Purim story, are thought to be Cushites. A juxtaposition in the ancient texts. They’re the downtrodden, and they’re the leaders. As we struggle with these texts, we realize that in many ways, this reflects our society today. We know the plight and struggle of the African American community today, yet we are also privileged to see the first black President of our country. From antiquity until now, the challenge of race, and the struggle for equality, are intertwined with Jewish tradition.

Day 5: Pick a day. Any day over the last months. There’s another story on the news of an unarmed black man killed by police. By now, we’ve practically become numb to the news of another Terence Crutcher, Keith Scott, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Michael Brown, Freddy Gray, and on, and on and on. And we sigh with sadness, resignation and frustration that there’s another protest in Tulsa, in Charlotte, in Minneapolis, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Dallas. And let’s be honest: we probably feel a little relief, too, that it’s not here. We’re angered when it turns violent, protestors only hurting themselves or worse, taking the lives of those sworn to protect and defend THEM, as we saw in Dallas earlier this summer.

As frustrating, as maddening and as distant as these shootings and protests might feel, we **must** acknowledge that they are symptoms of a racial crisis in our nation.

The challenge of race goes back to the earliest days of our country. Even just a week ago, President George W. Bush acknowledged it. At the opening ceremony Smithsonian Institution’s, National Museum of African American History and Culture, a museum he signed the authorization for, President Bush said:

“A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws, and corrects them. This museum tells the truth that a country founded on the promise of liberty held millions in chains, that the price of our union was America’s original sin.”³

Though freedoms were hard fought and won over our nation’s history, today the black community is in peril. There remains a persistent gap in education and wealth between the black and white communities. Unemployment numbers in communities of color are nearly twice that of the white population.⁴ Nearly 40% of black children live below the poverty line.⁵

In the past 40 years we have seen more than a 600% increase in incarceration rates in the black community. And that’s not because they are simply committing more crimes- study after study show that a black defendant is more likely to be convicted and sent to prison than a white defendant for the same crime.⁶

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/09/24/read-george-w-bushs-speech-at-the-african-american-museum-13-years-after-signing-the-bill-to-build-it/>

⁴ See, for example, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/08/04/a-remarkable-look-at-the-gap-between-black-and-white-unemployment/>

⁵ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/14/black-child-poverty-rate-holds-steady-even-as-other-groups-see-declines/>

⁶ Several studies bare out these statistics, including <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/18/chart-of-the-week-the-black-white-gap-in-incarceration-rates/>

Professor Michelle Alexander, the author of “The New Jim Crow” claimed there are more African American men in prison and jail, or on probation and parole, than were slaves in 1850 and before the Civil War.⁷

We may not like it; we may not want to accept it. We may say that the African American community must take responsibility for these problems and be a part of solving them, and indeed that’s true. But when we place all the responsibility **solely** on the black community, we fail to see that our societal system is broken, and perpetuates inequality and disparity. We can only say “it’s their fault” or “it’s their responsibility” from a position of privilege.

Look around this room. We are Jews, but with the rare exception of Jews of color, we are white. We are seen that way first by others. And as my friend David Spinrad said, “we are the beneficiaries of a meritocracy that favors the perceived color of our skin.”⁸ Don’t get me wrong. We have worked, and worked hard, to achieve a success our ancestors could only dream of. But we have been extremely fortunate to be in **THIS** nation at **THIS** moment in history that allows us the chance to succeed **in part** because we are first seen as white. And along with our success we forgot something.

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, former President of Bar Ilan University, taught in the 1970s that “...Judaism teaches a special kind of justice, an ‘empathic justice,’ which seeks to make people identify themselves with each other... Because Jews have known the distress of slaves and the loneliness of strangers, we are to project ourselves into their souls and make their plight our own.”⁹ That’s what allowed Jewish leaders to stand side by side with communities of color and fight for Civil

⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/12/michelle-alexander-more-black-men-in-prison-slaves-1850_n_1007368.html

⁸ “When You Will Lead and I Will Follow”, Rosh Hashanah sermon 2015

⁹ Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, "Torah Concept of Empathic Justice Can Bring Peace," The Jewish Week, April 3, 1977, 19. As quoted at <https://www.jewishveg.org/JudaismAndGlobalSurvival/SocialJustice.html>

Rights, to help found and fund the NAACP, to march in Selma, to be Freedom Riders in Mississippi, to stand on the mall in Washington DC. And yes, it compels some of us today to be on the streets of Dallas, Minneapolis and St Louis, and on the steps of the capital in Raleigh North Carolina. Some, but not enough.

On Yom Kippur afternoon we will read from Leviticus, “The strangers who reside with shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” We were the consummate stranger for hundreds of years. Yet can we remember how that felt? Can we find the empathic justice, and try to understand what it means to be a black person in this country? Can we feel the sense of oppression? Can we understand the fear when pulled over by the police? Can we be incensed when someone is killed and no one is held accountable? Can we, as Rabbi Rackman taught, make their plight our own?

Day 6: Today. Today is also known as Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement. Today our actions are laid bare before us, and we recognize what we did right, what we did wrong, and when we failed to act. I know that I have not done enough. With regret I acknowledge I did not join with my colleagues in the Journey for Justice last year, marching alongside members of the NAACP and the Central Conference of American Rabbis from Selma to Washington carrying a Torah scroll to proclaim a new call for civil rights and voting rights in the US. I have ignored the calls from FAST, our local interfaith social justice coalition to take part in making a difference in Pinellas County. I have wanted to establish partnerships between Temple B’nai Israel and local churches to bring real change and I’ve let that sit on the backburner.

But just as the shofar calls wake us up from our slumber, as I look back on the incredible experiences I had this past summer, I know this is the time to do more. I

may not have the answers to this remarkably complex challenge our nation faces, but I must do something. WE must do something.

What can we do? There's so much.

We can start by protecting the right so preciously won in 1965 and assist with voting. The deadline to register to vote is October 11th in Florida, coincidentally perhaps, Kol Nidre. Both parties have voter registration drives. Contact them. Go out this weekend and help others claim the right that truly free citizens have to voice their opinion in elections.

You can join with the Religious Action Center in their Nitzavim Voter Protection Initiative. Named for last week's Torah portion, this initiative will help train people to be poll watchers to ensure that elections are conducted fairly. They will review the laws here to see how we can help, or if you'd like you can travel to states like North Carolina or Ohio where voting rights are under attack. Please let me know if you'd like more information or go to www.rac.org to find out more.

As a congregation we can reclaim our role as leaders in FAST, Faith and Action through Strength Together, and lobby our local government to make changes to our educational and law enforcement systems.

We can take part in other civic organizations like Rotary Club or social service organizations like RCS and HEP to make small differences.

And while I'm not ready to stand here today and proclaim a grand congregational initiative on race, I **would** love to see us begin the work of bridging gaps in our community. I'd love to know that you want to work with me, that you want to take a leadership role, because you believe we as a Temple community can do real good, and be a part of the change that is so desperately needed.

We won't solve everything, and that's fine. Our tradition teaches *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'lo atah lhibateil mimena...* It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.”¹⁰

Day 7 is tomorrow. We are taught that the 7th day is the day of rest because God rested at the conclusion of Creation, took a look and said that everything was “*Tov Me'od...Very Good.*” We haven't reached Day 7 yet, because things aren't *Tov Me'od*, they're not very good. We will come to Day 7 when we can look back upon our efforts and know that we've made a difference. We will come to Day 7 when we've begun the task of healing our fractured nation, and help others come closer to achieving the same success and comfort we enjoy.

When the group from Camp Coleman visited Selma, Ms. Bland asked one counselor what community he lives in. His response was that he lives in many: a Jewish community, his home community, his school community. “**No**,” Ms. Bland replied, “you live in **ONE** community, the world. And in one community what's good for you is good for me, too. And the sooner we all understand that, the sooner we can make this community better.” Ms. Lowry added that each one of us is a piece in our community's jigsaw puzzle, and without our involvement, the puzzle isn't complete. I don't know if they knew they were espousing the teaching of the ancient Rabbi Hillel that day... “*Im ain ani li mi li – If I am not for myself, who will be for me? U'k'she ani l'atzmi mah ani? – But if I am for myself alone, what am I? v'im lo achshav eimatai? And if not now, when?*”¹¹

¹⁰ Pirke Avot 2:21

¹¹ Pirke Avot 1:14

If not now, when. As we enter this year 5777, may we begin the work, and the healing now, that allows us to reach Day 7 as well.¹²

¹² My great thanks to Bobby Harris and the staff of Camp Coleman for providing me the opportunity to participate in the Chalutzim trip Second Session 2016, Rabbi David Spinrad for presenting his thoughts and sharing his ideas, and to Rabbi Heidi Cohen for her editing, her sharing and her support!