



Temple Rodef Shalom

Rabbi Amy M. Schwartzman

Rosh Hashanah 5776/2015

Finding Our Place in the Story of Race

Royal and I got to know one another as we walked north on Route 1 from Richmond towards Washington, DC. He told about his time as the president of the local NAACP in Steubenville, Ohio. I told him about our community here in Falls Church. It turns out we both have new drivers in our families – my daughter and his twin sons. I say, “It’s a scary time, right? Letting your child go out with the car on their own?” I’m thinking about the first accident, hoping it’s very minor, about the temptation of the phone, about driving too fast. “Yes, scary, they might not know what to do the first time one of them is stopped.” Royal is not thinking about the first accident, but the first time his nearly 6-foot tall, African American sons, encounter the police. He tells me, “They are great kids, good students; but you know, when one of them is stopped, the police won’t see a member of the church youth choir or a baseball player; they won’t ask to see his report card; they will only see black.” I felt so naïve and self-absorbed. With all that has happened in the past year – Michael Brown, Freddie Grey, Eric Gardner, Tamir Rice, the tragedy in Charleston – I have been reading, I have been talking, trying to better understand race in our country, trying to understand where I am in the story. I am clearly still learning.

This past Friday, a dozen Temple members and I joined in one leg of America’s Journey for Justice, an 860-mile march from Selma, Alabama to Washington, DC. The NAACP has organized this march, co-sponsored by the Reform Movement, to highlight and address continuing issues of racial injustice. For 40 days the group has walked up America’s highways accompanied and encouraged by the blue flashing lights of law enforcement - that very institution that blocked such marches 50 years ago. Each night the group gathers in a church, once in a while in a temple, for dinner and a teach-in about social justice; everyone sleeps overnight and rises together in the morning to take up the journey once again. The leaders, elders of the African American community, veterans of many civil rights events, carry the

American Flag. And we carry a Torah scroll, connecting us to the rabbis who marched alongside Dr. King 50 years ago.

When I first heard about the Journey for Justice I was eager to sign up because for many months, as I watched tragic injustice after tragic injustice, I have felt so powerless. Perhaps you have felt this way too. Dismayed, shocked, looking for hope. This year we observed the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Alabama and the Watts riots in LA; we celebrated the Voting Rights Act. But between those historic reunions were Ferguson, Baltimore, Staten Island and Charleston.

In the 60s the Reform Movement was deeply involved in civil rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were drafted in our Movement's Religious Action Center on Mass. Ave. a few miles from here. Our Movement's president, Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, marched with the Torah next to Dr. King. Our vice-president, Kivie Kaplan, became the president of the NAACP from 1966-1974.

Can you imagine if these leaders were here today? They might question – where is the progress? They might wonder - how it is that incarceration, unemployment, and poverty remain the center of the most prevalent problems of racial injustice? Where is the Jewish community in the picture today? They would ask. They might suggest, as I will now, that Rosh Hashanah, our period of personal assessment and reflection and change, is the time when we should consider our individual and collective role in the story of race and in the struggle for racial equality.

If you are sensing that I may be getting political here, you are correct. Aristotle defines political as that which relates to the structure and organization of a society. And by that definition I intend to be political because race has deep political implications. And because I believe that the Torah is, among other things, a political document. As social justice rabbi Jill Jacobs teaches, "The Torah is political because it lays out a vision for a just and civil society. It is political because a liberation struggle stands at its core. It is political because it forbids those with more power from taking advantage of those with less. And it is political because it is...meant to be lived."<sup>1</sup>

Whenever I engage in a conversation about Judaism, most people begin and end with these very ideas. We love that the Torah pushes us towards *Tikkun Olam* – repairing the world. We love the ethics and the value-based rituals. If Judaism did not address what’s happening in the world, our everyday world, we would probably have moved on. And so, to know what it means to be a Jew today is, among other things, to understand what our Judaism says about racial issues. And to know what it means to be an American Jew (and here’s the hard part) is to understand the ways in which we have contributed to racial injustice. It is to understand white privilege and to learn more about our place in the story of race.

Now, I know that not all of us here in this sanctuary are white, and not all of us are Jewish. And for some of us, the story of race is one that plays out every day. And, I know that many of us here are intensely involved in the pursuit of justice through our many TRS initiatives or professionally or in our neighborhoods. I also believe that we are all upright people who care deeply about others. I don’t believe any of us are racists.

But, if we are to do the hard work of these Days of Awe, we must look at ourselves to see that we share accountability for enduring a society that reaps the harvest of deeply ingrained, even if often unconscious, prejudices. Royal doesn’t only fear for that encounter with that one policeman, he fears that his sons will become trapped in a system that spirals many black men down towards poverty, towards disenfranchisement, towards despair. Royal fears that one of his sons could become a statistic - perhaps the one in every three black men who are in jail or on probation or parole. If branded a felon he would never vote again, he would likely remain unemployed, not eligible for loans for education or housing. It would be nearly impossible for him to escape poverty. These young men face risks and challenges that few of us here will ever know.

Many of us are familiar with the distressing statistics that link the black and brown community to poverty, our penal system, police brutality and more. Understanding the roots of these problems, however, means going deeper than data. We have to listen to stories, study systems and assess institutions in ways that most of us have never done. In my college economics class, I was never asked to consider

the role of slavery in the creation of America's financial security. I rarely wonder about the diversity or lack of it in a movie theater or notice who might be dining around me in a restaurant. But perhaps I should. And in doing so, perhaps I may uncover new pathways to understanding racial issues in my world. The New Year is a time for us to seek out new lenses, to study our nation from new viewpoints, to wonder what it feels like to be Royal or his sons. Or to be a neighbor who just arrived from Pakistan or your child's friend who is in the ESL program. It's time for us to ask new questions and find some new angles from which to understand race.

For me, an important new perspective came when I was speaking with an African American Minister after the Charleston tragedy. I commented: "I am in awe of the forgiveness being offered up by the Charleston community." He showed me his lens, "Don't you see that we've got to forgive him. We've got no choice. Because if we don't forgive him, all of our anger will be put on this one boy and we won't direct ourselves to the real demon." We talked about how the papers labeled the murderer mentally ill; they singled him out as an aberration, as a bad apple, instead of looking through the lens that reveals that he is the product of culture where many national myths endorse one identity based on whiteness and exclude other identities based on color.

I am clearly still learning. The perpetrator has been arrested but the killer is still at large.

At times it can be confusing to wrestle with this issue of race as a Jew. We have our own stories of oppression, discrimination and abuse. There was Egypt, the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust – we all know this list. And because of it, some people take the stance: "Well, this surely isn't about me, because I'm not white, I'm Jewish. My people have experienced systematic extermination because of our religion and ethnicity. After all that we have been through, how can we be among the oppressors?"

I'm not white, I'm Jewish! Yes, the Jewish people have the scars that prove we suffer racial injustice. But when most of our grandparents came to this country, they made certain decisions to change their lives so that they could reap the benefits of white America.

First, these ancestors of ours had to assimilate and act white, giving up or at least adapting our language, food and culture. Second they had to buy into a greater political system that reinforced racism. In exchange for education, housing and jobs we, Jews, had to agree, in a subconscious way, to use our newly accepted whiteness to support and perpetuate discrimination against people of color.<sup>2</sup>

This is indeed hard to hear, it's been hard for me to get my head around - I am after all, still learning. My grandfather, a Lithuanian immigrant, Eliyahu who changed his name to Louis, became a Mason in 1940. I imagine that for him, this was a milestone in becoming American. But of course, there were no people of color allowed in the Masons when he joined. He used his white skin privilege to advance his place in society and, ultimately, I have also benefited from that.

The important take away for us from this reflection on the American Jewish assimilation story is not the confusion about what it means to be both white and Jewish – but how paralyzing that confusion becomes when we're needed by people of color to be their partners in combating racism. How can we be effective allies in addressing our country's injustices when we are stuck trying to sort out whether and in what ways we are white? And how can we respond to Judaism's expectation that we involve ourselves in creating an unbiased politic when we don't know where we are in the story of race.

On the night before we marched in Richmond, there was a rally at the Virginia Union University – a historically African American college. Sitting behind me was a white minister from a local church. When she found out I was Jewish, she said: "You are so lucky. I wish I could read God's most powerful texts like you do." "Do you mean, read them in Hebrew?" I asked. "No," she said, "read them through the unique Jewish lens that knows slavery and oppression and is called to social justice."

And again, I am still learning - even when I think I know my own tradition. All year long the Torah commands us to empathize with the experience of those who are treated unfairly and those who are marginalized; each week we are called upon to 'not stand idle' while someone else is suffering. We read our own story of Egypt and that experience serves as the moral underpinning for bringing liberation to all

those who are oppressed. But do we recognize the story that is playing out before us today? Can we see both the reflection of our past there, as well as the impress of our own fingerprints? Might we come to understand that our greatest effectiveness as an ally to people of color comes from our history and experience as Jews and our tradition's call to us to pursue justice?

Joining the march was a way for me to get beyond reading, listening and thinking about race and step onto the path of change. While it was only a small contribution and much more must follow, participating in America's Journey for Justice put me on the road to fulfilling our tradition's call to respond to racism, injustice and discrimination. Walking alongside African Americans and other Jews who were seeking to act reminded me that, in truth, I am not powerless. I realized that with all of the confusion and complexity around issues of race, the most important thing is to put ourselves on the journey, to re-engage in the story, to start moving and not stand idly by.

At the rally on the night before we marched, many inspiring people spoke to the crowd. Towards the end of the evening, an eleven-year-old boy named Elijah delivered a compelling speech about racism in America. We were all in awe of this young man. I was waiting off stage for my turn to speak when Elijah came up beside me. In that moment, I felt a strong connection with this boy. His call to action embodied the essence of our Torah. I turned to Elijah and asked him, "When I speak will you stand next to me and hold the Torah?" He asked me, "Is it heavy?" "Yeah," I said, "I guess it is." Elijah replied, "I'll take it!" And so must we.

Ken Y'hi Razon! May it be God's will.

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph as articulated by Rabbi Michael Knoph, Richmond, VA in his sermon entitled The Charleston Nine.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Kivel, “I’m not White, I’m Jewish” 1998.