

Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof: A Jewish Call to Action in the Wake of Philando Castile's Death
D'var Torah given by Mount Zion's Youth Engagement Director Liza Henry on July 8

Our Torah tells us to remember that WE were slaves in the land of Egypt. We were. Not our ancestors, us. Today in our country and our community, our neighbors are still slaves. They are still shackled by our system, by our biases, by our culture of violence.

I spent most of yesterday with our community remembering Philando Castile and standing up for change. I am not here to tell you about what I did. This is not about me. I don't deserve a cookie. I don't get to pat myself on the back. The only reward for standing up for justice, is justice. I am here to share the important and powerful messages and the desperate call to action from those in our community whose lives are in danger.

After watching the video of Philando Castile's death, I could not sit and do work, I could not think. And, like many of us, I quite wasn't sure what to do. Philando was killed just up the road. His was a beloved member of the staff at a school around the corner from my own home. He was a part of our community and he was a man who loved the people of this community.

And he was black. In "Between the World and Me," Ta-Nehisi Coates explains that "It is traditional to destroy the black body - it is heritage." What happened to Philando is not new. It wasn't new when it happened to Jamar Clark or Eric Garner or Michael Brown or Tamir Rice. Our country has never respected the black body as belonging to a human with a soul. We enslaved the black body for our use. And when we legally ended

slavery as a practice, we instituted laws that allowed us to keep the black body in our control.

As Jews, we believe that every body is made *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of G-d. We at Mount Zion teach our children that they valued in mind and body, that they have a right to consent or refuse anything regarding their body, that *Shmirat HaGuf*, protection of the body, is so important, and that higher than nearly any other mitzvah is *Pikuach Nefesh*, saving a life. A LIFE. We do not distinguish between my life and yours, between a criminal life and a police life, between a Jew's life and a Muslim's life. Every body is sacred, every life deserves to be saved.

We teach this all to our children. And I ask you today, are you acting on our Jewish values for all people? We are a people who have been denied rights time and time again. Our bodies have been abused and destroyed. And yet, most of us here today will never, ever, truly know the black experience. Those of us who are not black and do not have black children or families will never know what it is like to hold your son so tight because he may not come back from school. We will never know what it is like to fear that you may be killed for a broken tail light. We will never know what it is like to fear that your father, son, uncle, brother or husband will be killed for nothing at all in a country that claims that all men are made equal. Accepting and understanding that we can never fully understand is vital to pursuing justice for those who experience life and death as a black person everyday.

The president of the Minneapolis NAACP, Nekima Levy-Pounds, led yesterday's press conference. She reminded us in the crowd that "Two of our biggest enemies are complacency and silence in the midst of oppression." Complacency and silence were our enemies in the Holocaust. We cannot become these enemies today. We are commanded *Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof*, Justice, Justice shall you pursue. We need to pursue that justice now. We need to *be* that justice, now. A young NAACP member and student at Macalester college, Ayaan Natala said what many of us need to hear. She said, "We are targets until proven human. We are not human on Summit Avenue."

This is Summit Avenue. We, Mount Zion, are Summit Avenue. And we need to ensure that in our community, the black body is not a body to be exploited, not a body to be targeted, but a human, with a soul. A human with a right to justice. A human with a right to life. A human with a right to live without fear.

I am asking you to join our community. Thousands of people showed up yesterday at the governor's mansion and JJ Hill Montessori. We learned that Mr. Phil was a kind, loving man. We learned that he calmed children who struggled to find calm in their environment. He is described by our own Sally Rafowitz as "Mr. Rogers with Dreadlocks." We learned that Philando graduated with honors from Central High School. We learned that he cared deeply for his family. We learned that today would be his 33rd birthday. We learned about Philando because he is a human with a soul and his body was destroyed.

And we stood up because Philando is not the first and will probably not be the last. Many of us marched peacefully , spreading the message that enough is enough. This is a piece of pursuing justice. We must show up. And the police stood peacefully accepting that their duty yesterday was to protect and serve and they did that and we are asking for that respect and behavior all the time for all people.

And if you are not sure that you are prepared to stand and make your voice heard, then prepare yourself now. Do your research, understand how we ended up here. Learn about the history of black people in America and don't wait for Black History Month to do so. Read the work of black authors. Not just one, but many, because they are all individuals. We say two Jews, three opinions and that is not so different in the black community.

Contact your representatives and tell them that action is overdue. That apologies are not good enough and that they must ACT on their words. Tell them to represent the WHOLE community, not just those of us who have privilege.

Learn about and recognize your own privilege. Privilege is not earned. Privilege is simply received by being a part of the majority group in power. I am white. I am here today and I will leave without the fear of being killed by a police officer on my way home. I will wake up tomorrow without the fear that my brother will be assumed dangerous because of the color of his skin. I am not followed when in a store and people do not cross the street to

avoid walking near me. I have advantages in every part of my life that make everything that much easier, simply because I am white.

Finally, love thy neighbor as thyself. Reach out.. Just two weeks ago, the organization Sandy Hook Promise spoke to the teens at the URJ Kutz Camp about reaching out as a means to end violence. So, in a moment, I am going to ask you to turn to your neighbor, whether you came here with them or not. I am going to ask you to look into their eyes. If you cannot look into their eyes, simply turn your body to face theirs. Then I want you to say these words, "I see you. I hear you." If you are the person listening, share something about how you are feeling in this moment. After you have had a chance to share, switch roles. To review, look at the person next to you and say, "I see you, I hear you." then share some thoughts, then switch.

Now, when you leave here, spread that love to all your neighbors. For most of us, it is uncomfortable to start a conversation with someone we do not know, and that is okay. And we need to take that step out of our comfort zone, we need to love our neighbors because WE were slaves in the land of Egypt.

I am going to ask you to end with a chant that can be heard across the country right now and comes from Assata Shakkur. Please repeat after me, and do it loudly:

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.

It is our duty to win.

We must love and support one another.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

I wish everyone a peaceful Shabbat and I pray for a more peaceful and just world for every member of our community.

Shabbat Shalom.