

Making our Hands Wise for Equity and Justice

Adam Stock Spilker, Rabbi - Mount Zion Temple - January 13, 2017 – 16 Tevet 5777 – Shabbat Tzedek

This Shabbat before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is also the last Shabbat of the administration of the first African-American President.

That fact just takes the breath away as we imagine its implications. Apart from how each of us assesses President Obama's legacy, whether we are Republican or Democrat or other, these eight years have shown a dignified first family above any personal reproach who have been exemplars for all Americans and, for people of color, the embodiment of the possibility of achieving one's dreams.

Eight years ago, Obama's campaign was organized around hope. It was a different time. Many people dared to imagine the world as it ought to be, not just as it is. Many could say without irony or apology that we had the possibility in our hands to change the world, to repair the world, and in our language *l'takein olam b'malchut shaddai*, to repair the world within the sovereignty of the Almighty. Tikkun Olam, repairing the breach, partnering with God to improve our world, appeals to our sense of hope and promise.

Prof. Marshall Ganz from Harvard teaches that this organizing strategy works in a time of hope. However, when you find yourself in a time of pain, you cannot falsely organize around hope. You need to touch the pain and organize around self-interest. We need to listen more and inspire less. For us as Jews, this is to focus less on *tikkun olam* and more on our people's foundation story of leaving Egypt, *yitziyat mitzrayim*. In the words of poet Marge Piercy:

...So they walked out of Egypt. So they bribed their way
out of Russia under loads of straw; so they steamed
out of the bloody smoking charnelhouse of Europe
on overloaded freighters forbidden all ports—

out of pain into death or freedom or a different
painful dignity, into squalor and politics.

We Jews are all born of wanderers, with shoes
under our pillows and a memory of blood that is ours
raining down. We honor only those Jews who changed
... those who chose the desert over bondage,

who walked into the strange and became strangers
and gave birth to children who could look down
on them standing on their shoulders for having
been slaves....

Yes, we have experienced fierce repression in many places over generations, and yes, today we are seeing a return to old tropes of anti-Semitism. Thankfully we are also seeing many partners standing up with us against hate. Just this week, the city council of Great Falls, Montana where Jews comprise 1/10th of 1 percent of the population, authored a resolution supporting their Jewish neighbors in Whitefish, Montana where a Nazi march was planned for this weekend. The march has since been postponed. In the resolution, they cited George Washington's famous letter to the Jews of Newport—in which the American founder promised to give “bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance” and Pastor Martin Niemöller's famous anti-Nazi poem recounting how “they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out.” Then they say:

“Recent events in our sister city of Whitefish, Montana, remind us that the plagues of anti-Semitism, ethnic and racial hate, and intolerance remain a stain on an otherwise decent society....We [denounce] hate, bigotry, and intolerance, which today masquerade under euphemisms such as ‘white nationalism’ and the ‘alt-right’; and ... we express our solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the ongoing struggle to free this world of the ideas and conduct that serve to undermine a free and virtuous society....To those who would promote these false ideas long since rejected by civilized peoples,” it concluded, “we say, ‘le’olam lo’—‘Never again!’”ⁱ

Remarkable. When we fear or despair because of the few who gain much publicity with their hate, we need to celebrate that we are still in a remarkable country where people stand up for each other. We Jews, with our history and with our narrative of leaving Egypt, have also stood

by our neighbors in their times of persecution; we have a legacy of struggle in defense of civil and human rights. Tonight on this Shabbat called Shabbat Tzedek in the Reform Movement, the Sabbath of justice, allows us to rededicate ourselves to supporting our neighbors, to finding the ways in this unique moment in history to find our voice, to find our courage, to find our will to stand up for justice.

“Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles,” said Dr. King in a radio broadcast 49 years ago tomorrow. “Cowardice is submissive surrender to circumstances. Courage breeds creativity; Cowardice represses fear and is mastered by it. Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But, conscience asks the question, is it right?”

- Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Radio Broadcast, KPFA, Santa Rita CA, January 14, 1968.

And as the Rev. William Barber, head of the NAACP in North Carolina, preaches, “We are not advocating for left or right, but for what is good and right.”ⁱⁱ

When Jacob blesses his grandsons in this week’s parshah, he advocates for what is good and right. He crosses his hands, putting his right hand on the head of the younger, his left on the elder. In that move, he rejects the conventions of his day, he stands up for the rights of the disadvantaged son, he makes a *tikkun*, a fix, to the sins of filial rivalry in Genesis by creating equity between Ephraim and Manasseh, and thus changes the course of history. In Hebrew, the verb for “crossing” when Jacob crosses his hands, is *sikel* which generally means making wise, so literally, he made his hands wise.

This is our task too. To bring blessing to others by making our hands wise. We make our hands wise when we reach out our hands to others, and simply get close, proximate in Bryan Stevenson’s language, close with neighbors and get to know each other and to support each other. We make our hands wise when we pick up the pen or the placard to write to our representatives and demonstrate in the street. We make our hands wise when we pick up books to learn history. We must learn history. As William Faulkner observed, “The past is not dead. It's not even past.”

So I want to share some of our past because it is not past; it informs our present and we cannot be blind to its impact even if we can debate its implications. What I will share comes from my friend Caroline Light, Director of Undergraduate Studies for Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Harvard. It came in preparing for her book which will be published this year called *“Stand Your Ground: America’s Love Affair with Deadly Self-Defense.”*

This nation was founded on chattel slavery and settler colonialism, which required armed violence to sustain. Starting very early, our nation’s legal apparatus and culture worked in tandem to grant to some—originally European-descended, property-owning white men—access to tools of mass violence, to fortify white property and political power in the name of self-defense. Centuries ago, as Europeans claimed land that was already occupied, the calculated murder of Native populations guaranteed the ascendancy of white Manifest Destiny. It is difficult to calculate the millions of Native lives lost, some to systematic mass killings—where entire villages were wiped out by white men with rifles—and others to famine, displacement, and the (often deliberate) spread of disease. In one instance alone, in Pound Ridge, New York in 1644, armed Dutch men obliterated a sleeping village of approximately 500 Lenape. Similar atrocities proliferated, culminating in the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1890, where between 150 and 300 Lakota died at the hands of U.S. Soldiers.

Justified as necessary to national protection and expansion, these mass killings were largely characterized as “Indian wars” in which both sides carried equal responsibility. More recently, we have been able to see them as massacres, as genocidal efforts to eradicate an entire people, but our history books often fail to name them as such. Their mischaracterization in popular memory sanitizes the violence of U.S. history, perpetuating what Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz calls the mythology of pre-colonial North America as “a land without people.”

There are other brutal precursors to our current state, in which mass murder has become a common occurrence. Shortly after slavery was outlawed by the Thirteenth Amendment, white men armed with the newest firearms and weapons decimated entire African-American communities. They did this in cities throughout the U.S.: in Colfax,

Louisiana in 1873, with an estimated death toll of 150; in New Orleans in 1866, where 238 were killed; in Atlanta, Georgia in 1906, with the loss of between twenty-five and forty lives; in East St Louis in 1917, with a death toll estimated between forty to 150. It happened too in 1921, when whites firebombed Greenwood, an affluent Black community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, known as Black Wall Street. An estimated 300 were killed, and almost \$2 million in property was destroyed.ⁱⁱⁱ

In more recent history, we feel the implications of our past in economics, education, and incarceration. Just a few facts to illustrate: The gap between the rich and poor today is as wide as it was in the late 1920s. In the Twin Cities, as progressive as Minnesota has been, the number of severely segregated schools in the Twin Cities area has increased more than sevenfold in the past fifteen years^{iv}. In America, more Black people are in jail today than there were slaves in 1850.^v Our incarceration as a nation has gone from 300,000 people in prison in the early 70s to over 2 million today even though violent crime is down over 50 percent in the past quarter century.^{vi} A million of those people are Black, incarcerated at six times the rate as whites. The reason, as argued so persuasively by Michelle Alexander in her book *The New Jim Crow*, was a War on Drugs that targeted the inner city more than the suburban mall. Put another way, 5 times as many whites are using drugs as African Americans, yet African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of whites.

Yavilah McCoy, an African-American Jew and a teacher, writer and activist, says what we can do about this. First before I quote her, take a breath, a deep breath. We have heard a lot of staggering and startling facts.....

McCoy says that if you are going to work for racial justice, it means to be proactive about thinking about equity on multiple levels, the personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional. It is about recognizing the impact of modern racism on us personally whether we have been historically included, whether we have had the power of privilege and access to be able to discriminate against others or whether we have felt we have been the target of discrimination or exclusion in the context of racial practices. Wherever we see ourselves, racial justice is the work of creating systems of equity. And doing that work daily, not just with whom we hang out, but in the way we can impact systems with our behavior.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches this is the soul of Judaism: “Judaism begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be...Judaism is the revolutionary moment at which humanity refuses to accept the world that is.”^{vii} We need to make our hands wise to seek out equity.

Which brings us back to hope. Yes, this is a time many are feeling more of the pain than of hope, but we don't have to give up on hope. We cannot. Marshall Ganz, whose teaching about organizing around hope and pain I mentioned earlier, also gives us a message of finding hope despite the pain. He paraphrases Maimonides to say that to be a realist is to know that in the world, there is also possibility, not just probability. It is always probable that Goliath will win, but sometimes David does. Bullies and demagogues will darken our days, but groups of Maccabees working together to hold onto light will ultimately prevail. Hope is belief in the plausibility of the possible instead of the necessity of the probable.

I want to end in prayer in the words of Dr. Yolanda Pierce, Associate Professor of African American Religion and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary

God, in your mercy

Show me my own complicity in injustice.

Convict me for my indifference.

Forgive me when I have remained silent.

Equip me with a zeal for righteousness.

Never let me grow accustomed or acclimated to unrighteousness.

Friends, on this Shabbat Tzedek, may we hear this prayer soulfully, and then make our hands wise to build a world of love, a world of justice, a world of peace. *Ken yih ratzon.*

ⁱ <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/221890/city-of-great-falls-montana-issues-moving-resolution-backing-jews-in-whitefish-assailed-by-neo-nazis>

ⁱⁱ The Third Reconstruction: Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics, and the Rise of a New Justice Movement, with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, p. 12

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Light's article appeared after the mass shooting in Orlando at a LGBTQ nightclub in June 2016: <http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2016/06/mass-killing-in-popular-misremembering.html>

^{iv} Why are the Twin Cities So Segregated? (February, 2015):

<http://www.minnpost.com/sites/default/files/attachments/WhyAretheTwinCitiesSoSegregated22615.pdf>

^v Cited by many and researched to be true. <http://www.politifact.com/rhode-island/statements/2014/dec/07/diego-arene-morley/brown-u-student-leader-more-african-american-men-p/>

^{vi} Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, p. 6.

^{vii} From a powerful book by former Chief Rabbi of England, Rabbi Sacks, called *A Letter in the Scroll*. You can see the reference [here](#).