

Praying for Merciful Waters: Racial Justice in America

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I will never forget the feeling of watching the boat drive away from me. I was off the coast of one of the Galapagos Islands, on vacation with my family and some friends, grateful for our friend finding an inexpensive way to reach this exotic destination two Decembers ago. Our guide Yaz had told us to snorkel in this spot. He would watch the kids; no need for a life jacket; it would only get in the way. Great fish to see here. The water was choppy here than anywhere we had been, a half mile off the coast, in the midst of the Pacific. I looked down, heard my loud breathing, swam for a while looking at a school of beautiful King Angelfish; a sea lion brushed my leg. I looked up as waves got stronger and already Yaz and the kids were at a distance, Rachel with them. The sun brightly shimmered off the water. The boat that had taken us was a ways off. So suddenly I was alone. I was a decent swimmer, but the feeling of abandonment quickly affected me. Anxiety kicked in. Waves crashed over me as I could see the boat going further away. I yelled. No one heard. I swam for the boat; it kept moving. This couldn't be, I thought. How easily one can succumb to the forces of nature. I started realizing that I really could drown. Lines from TS Eliot's poem *the Wasteland* echoed in my ears, "Here, said she, / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor, / ... Fear death by water," a line that had stuck with me over the years. This moment of getting away from it all, a privilege I enjoyed, so easily could become tragic. I kept swimming toward the boat. I couldn't let this happen. I swallowed some water, felt more panic as I was no closer. I couldn't see Rachel or the kids. So much flashing before my mind and then finally determination – I could not let anything happen. Swimming amidst struggle for what felt like forever until finally reaching the boat, so profoundly relieved, grateful, and still shaking.

Ever since that December, the memory of being alone and vulnerable in the waters would come to me at various times. I became even more aware of other people's suffering in whatever waters they struggled. Just last month, there it was. I was debating whether to fly to Alabama to participate with the NAACP's America's Journey for Justice.¹ It felt like a message this time. My life has generally been one full of blessings; I have not had to struggle to achieve. I have worked hard, but so many doors have opened for me. Of course, as a Jew, I am part of a people that has faced catastrophic persecution and right now in Europe, anti-Semitic attacks are becoming more regular and cause for concern. But here in America growing up in the 70s and 80s, I benefited from the previous generations' efforts that granted Jews new access, for many the promise of suburban life, and freedom from overt anti-Semitism.

The same is not true for people who are Black. While Jim Crow laws of segregation are a thing of the past, segregation in reality is not. Affirmative action has granted new access for significant numbers but perhaps diverted attention from the many more mired in poverty and caught in cycles of incarceration. Today in America, fifty years after the height of Civil Rights successes, what has been known to many has become clear to most: we have not progressed as much as we thought and in some respects, have turned back the clocks on equality.

We have all seen the results: increased media attention on police shootings of unarmed Black men, #BlackLivesMatter protests in the streets from Ferguson to Baltimore, renewed political debate about prison reform, and the racially-motivated murders at Mother Emmanuel in Charleston, followed by a series of arsons at Black churches.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 in an era of lynching against colored people, as Blacks were then called. Jews have been partners with the NAACP from the beginning. Four years before its founding, Leo Frank, a Jewish factory superintendent,

was wrongly accused of a crime and was lynched in Georgia, a horror out from which the Anti-Defamation League was established.

This summer, the NAACP wanted to channel all of the anger and injustices experienced over this past year into positive action, a march from Selma, Alabama to Washington DC, nearly a thousand miles over 40 days, a new civil rights journey for lives, votes, jobs, and education. Fifty years ago, crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma gave birth to the Voting Rights Act, granting access to the ballot for so many. What would this crossing of American accomplish?

And would my joining a march make a difference? It felt both too little and too late and more symbolic than substance. Then I caught myself – how easy it is to rationalize away action. My brief struggle in the Pacific was nothing compared to day-to-day, frightening struggles of economic insecurity, incarceration, and racism. Whatever I could do would be something. As prophetic voices from Martin Luther King to Ellie Wiesel have often reminded us: evil arises from indifference. Injustices are sustained when moderates, the majority, are silent just when they should be outraged.

As a Jew, I have a responsibility to the words I say every time I sing *Mi Chamocha*, our song of redemption after crossing the Red Sea, of being part of a people who sees our foundational experience to be *yitziat mitzrayim*, leaving Egypt, the emergence from slavery to freedom. I also have a responsibility to previous generations of Jews whose partnership for Civil Rights helped define what it means to live Torah values in America. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, along with the Civil Rights Act the year before, were drafted on the table of our Reform Movement's Religious Action Center in Washington DC, the place where Rachel and I served as interns when we first met twenty five years ago.

I decided to go to Montgomery. I helped organize other rabbis to join the march and was heartened by the response: over 100 rabbis signed up within two days. By time the march concludes in Washington on this Wednesday, over 200 rabbis and many other Jews will have participated for at least one day.

I flew to Montgomery, full of contrasts, home of the Confederacy White House and the Civil Rights Museum. On that hot summer day, 105 degree heat index, we walked for 19 miles along a small county road from Opelika, Alabama crossing the Georgia border at West Point. Six state trooper cars protected us. I quickly realized this was not just symbolic. Trucks with Confederate flags drove by and epithets were yelled. We were in parts of Alabama that had never had any march or rally come through, ever. The Alabama state constitution still prohibits Black and white kids from going to school together. They tried to take this provision out twice through a statewide referendum and both times, in 2004 and 2012, the majority of the people in the state voted to keep that language in the constitution. Still, along the way on porches and in parked cars, there were many others who cheered us on, coming up to walk for a while, offering refreshment, and asking questions.

Along the way, I carried a Torah scroll that had started in Selma, and has been passed hand to hand, rabbi to rabbi, marcher to marcher, over every mile of the journey to DC. The Torah, along with the American flag, were the only visible symbols during the long hours of marching every day. Our teachings of Torah have walked the walk. They are words of inspiration, of leaving Egypt, of treating others with dignity and love. They were carried in the streets of the South for forty days, like the forty days of Moses on Mount Sinai learning how to bring a new vision, a moral compass, into the world.

Fifty years ago, another Mount Zion Rabbi, Jerrold Goldstein, was one of seventeen who answered Martin Luther King's call for rabbis to join him in St. Augustine, Florida. This was a much more dangerous time to be standing for one's values and on behalf of others. On June 18, 1964, the rabbis and another St. Paul native Al Vorspan wrote the following from prison:

We came because we could not stand idly by our brother's blood. We had done that too many times before. We have been vocal in our exhortation of others but the idleness of our hands too often revealed an inner silence...we came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly, watching the smoke rise from Hitler's crematoria. 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.

In Alabama, I felt the joy and pain of taking an entire day learning the stories of so many people and what it took them to act including some people no longer with us. I heard about Kivie Kaplan, a Jewish leader after whom our Religious Action Center is named in Washington, DC who became president of the NAACP for nine years, one of a number of Jews to hold this position. Kaplan's commitment to combat racism began with a trip to Florida. He was picked up at the airport by a Black cab driver. The route took them along a road in a wealthy neighborhood lined with country clubs. Sign after sign said "No Jews". Kaplan remarked to the driver, "Can you believe they just put it out there like that?" The driver replied, "They don't even have to say 'No Blacks'." That's when Kivie decided he couldn't stand idly by.

This is all about proximity, being close to others whose lives are different. Too many of us are not close to others who are not like us or it happens only here and there. Fortunately many in this congregation know much more than I and live lives of connection within diverse communities. For the rest of us, Bryan Stevenson, Executive Director of the [Equal Justice Initiative](#), and a most compelling speaker is welcome counsel: "Proximity is the first important step for change."

In the morning before marching, I loaded bottles of water onto the bus with a man named Royal. Royal, father of four kids, leads the NAACP chapter in Ohio. His son just turned 17 years old and is starting to drive. Royal described his worries. They were the same worries I had for my son Eiden, of praying that he would make good decisions and drive safely. Yet his greatest concern was one I never had to wonder: what would happen if his son got stopped by the cops? Would he handle himself ok? Would the cops? Would he emerge safely?

Along the march, I met Keisha, who was walking all the way to Washington. Her life's defining moment happened when she was 18 years old at a largely African American protest when a Klansman showed up and started causing trouble. The mob turned on him, started hitting him, and knocked him to the ground. Without thinking everything through, Keisha threw her body on top of the Klansman to protect him and saved his life. She became somewhat famous for that moment, going on *Oprah* to talk about what enabled her to find such compassion in the face of hatred. I also met Ivan who was from Mississippi, in his 70s. He walked with a cane and quietly was determined to walk every mile even while many took breaks. So too a man named Middle Passage, a Vietnam vet also in his 70s from Colorado, a vibrant man full of love and teachings. He took his name Middle Passage which was a part of the slave trade to invoke the historical legacy of suffering during slavery while suggesting the aspirations of freedom by African-Americans. Tragically, two days ago, after going 922 miles, Middle Passage died suddenly from a heart attack on the march with the American flag proudly in his hands. His dream and now his death immediately impacts so many of us.ⁱⁱ May his memory be a blessing, a part of the story of this summer that will inspire, God willing, real change in our country.

As I reflect on race and racism, I want to be clear on one point: we Jews come in all shades, a million hues of white, black, olive, brown, yellow and more. In some places, as much as 20% of the American Jewish community is "racially diverse."ⁱⁱⁱ A Jewish mother shared in an online forum that she had adopted a newborn African American baby boy. Concerned about the recent police shootings, she wondered how she - a white Jewish woman - would tell her son about race, prejudice, and staying safe. She explained to him that she asked a Black male colleague, a vice-president of her company, for advice. He

told her to teach her son to smile, because people are scared of angry Black men. But he warned that her son can't smile too widely because Black men, who look too happy, may look suspicious. With tears, she asked, "How do I teach my child to have a half smile?"

I hear that question with such pain. Mary Oliver writes in one of her poems:^{iv}

Here is a story
to break your heart.
Are you willing?....

I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world.

A rabbi was once asked, "Why does the Torah tell us to 'Place these words **upon** your hearts?' in the second verse of the *v'ahavta* (Deut 6:6)? **עַל-לִבְבְּךָ** הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הַמִּצְוֹת אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְנֶךָ הָאֱלֹהִים הַדְּבָרִים הַיְיָ **Al Iv'vecha**. **Upon** our hearts. Why does it not tell us to place these holy words **in** our hearts?" The rabbi answered, "It is because right now our hearts are closed, and so we cannot place the holy words within them. So, we place these words on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, our hearts will break open, and the words will fall in."

Our hearts will break open from the stories we hear and the people we meet *and* from the astounding trends in our society. The gap between the rich and poor is 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^v. In America, more Black people are in jail today than there were slaves in 1850.^{vi} 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.^{vii} 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.

These injustices disproportionately impact people of color but ultimately, they affect us all^{viii}, and our obligation is to our brother or sister in need. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says 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."^{ix}

Today is Yom haDin, the Day of Judgement, one of the names for Rosh Hashanah. Our liturgical concern, the flow of our prayers, is to imagine God as Judge and to implore God to move from a place of strict judgment to a place of mercy. We each think about our own struggles, our wrongdoings, our time of inaction, and plead for mercy. We all want a second chance, love to course over our missteps. A world that is all justice cannot stand. Faced with the choice between justice and mercy, God chooses mercy for us every year, no matter how we have strayed. And in our interactions with our fellow human beings, we mirror God's choice: we have an obligation to forgive others. We want mercy for ourselves; we are obligated to provide mercy to others even those who have broken laws.

This is the title Bryan Stevenson chose for his book, *Just Mercy*.^x He speaks of our criminal justice system and the need from top to bottom for more mercy. Recently, Jewish Community Action, along with our Tzedek committee facilitated almost forty house meetings in homes across the Twin Cities about economic justice that ultimately addressed the need for mercy. Over four hundred people participated. In every one, issues of racism emerged, and on August 30th, the decision was made to focus on addressing prison reform.^{xi} So too, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the group representing 2000 Reform Rabbis, has made racial justice a top priority for this year including addressing mass incarceration^{xii}. Many are feeling the need for to address issues of racism and incarceration.

If Mussar has taught many of us anything, it is this: change begins with our self. Rabbi Israel Salanter counseled: “When I was young, I wanted to change the world. I tried, but the world did not change. Then I tried to change my town, but the town did not change. Then I tried to change my family, but my family did not change. Then I knew: first, I must change myself.”

What can we do? We can read and be open to change. Michelle Alexander’s *the New Jim Crow* and Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* are powerful windows into the brokenness of our society along race lines. We can address the restoration of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that congress is debating now. You will receive more information on this as you leave today.^{xiii} We can become involved in JCA’s prison reform work that our Tzedek/Social Action committee will inform us about in the weeks to come. We can also focus on our relationships, trying to reach out to neighbors and those who live just beyond our neighborhood. At Mount Zion, we have slowly been working on a partnership with Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church in the Rondo community.

In 1963, at a Conference on Religion and Race,^{xiv} Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that the first conference on religion and race was between Moses and Pharaoh. The tragedy of that summit meeting was a lack of mercy. Pharaoh had his own laws and order he was following. He could not fathom how to help the Israelites while not hurting the Egyptians. Heschel taught that the tragedy of Pharaoh was the failure to realize that the exodus from slavery could have spelled redemption for both Israel and Egypt. Would that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had joined the Israelites in the desert, crossed the Red Sea, and together stood at the foot of Sinai? Then the Red Sea waters of destruction for some could have been waters of deliverance for all. Then together, Jew and Egyptian, Black and white, would walk through the miraculous open seas without struggle, holding hands, singing a new song of redemption, *Mi Chamocha*, a song of justice overcome by mercy, a song of celebration.

Sermon Anthem: Mi Chamocha, Redemption Song (Bob Marley).

Recommended Books (from my colleague Rabbi Michelle Pearlman)

- *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson
- *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving
- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson
- *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* by Abraham Joshua Heschel
- *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot

For Kids

- *As Good as Anybody: Martin Luther King and Abraham Joshua Heschel* by Richard Michaelson.
 - This will be on the High Holy Day kit book cart for Yom Kippur.

- *28 Moments in Black History that Changed the World*, by Charles Smith
- *A Jar of Dreams* by Yoshiko Uchida
- *A Picture Book of Martin Luther King* by David A. Adler

Podcasts

- *This American Life The Problem We All Live With* (Parts 1 and 2)
- Bryan Stevenson on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross October 20, 2014 and TED Talk, March 14, 2014
- *Privilege and Pressure: A Memoir of Growing Up Black and Elite* in 'Negroland' NPR, Sept. 8, 2015

Endnotes:

ⁱ NAACP's America's Journey for Justice: <http://www.naacp.org/ajfi> and our Reform Movement's partnership: <http://www.rac.org/americas-journey-justice-dc-rally-and-advocacy-day>

ⁱⁱ Video tribute to Middle Passage, z'l. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jt34PiRdiFw>

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on data from 1990-2003 by [Be'chol Lashon](#), an organization dedicated to a Judaism that is global and diverse.

^{iv} Mary Oliver's Poem *Lead* quoted completely out of context for the sake of clarity.

<https://www.neopoet.com/kailashana/blog/840-am-2-jun-2011>

^v Why are the Twin Cities So Segregated? (February, 2015):

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

^{vi} 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/>

^{vii} Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, p. 6. Much of this sermon is inspired by my reading this book. Many other quotes and statistics were edited out. <http://newjimcrow.com/>

^{viii} Why is Prison Reform a Jewish Issue? – from *Truah* - <http://www.truah.org/images/MIH-why-prison-a-jewish-issue.pdf>

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

^x Bryan Stevenson's book *Just Mercy* and organization *Equal Justice Initiative*, are worthy of your time: <http://www.eji.org/>

^{xi} A description of the Tzedek Summit and background on Incarceration Reform. <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Drumroll-please.html?soid=1101992539824&aid=g5SjeB6N3oc>

^{xii} CCAR Resolution on Racial Justice <http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/2015/ccar-resolution-racial-justice/>

^{xiii} Copy of the postcard handed out at Rosh Hashanah and available at Mount Zion to send in.

<http://www.rac.org/sites/default/files/articles/files/Voting%20Rights%20Postcard.pdf>. Background on Voting Rights Advancement Act 2015 <http://www.rac.org/sites/default/files/articles/files/AJF%20Voting%20Rights%20One-Pager.pdf>

^{xiv} Heschel's full speaking notes from 1963 Conference on Religion and Race: <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/heschel-religion-and-race-speech-text/>