

Being Human Together¹
Rabbi Gary Pokras
Rosh HaShanah Morning 5776

We were deep in the rural south marching double file behind the American flag and the Torah. Black people, white people, Jews, Christians and Muslims – perhaps thirty of us in all. I had never been to South Carolina before, and had no idea what to expect. We had travelled about an hour by bus to the side of some road in the middle of nowhere, to begin that day's trek of 16 or 17 miles. Most of the people we encountered along the way were in cars. Some looked confused, and some looked angry, but most smiled, honked and waved. The leaders of the march would often shout out, "We're marching for you! Come and join us!"

I grew up learning about the Civil Rights Movement and how Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched arm in arm with Dr. King. I was captivated by Heschel's interpretation of his action as "praying with his feet," and I have quoted him often in my own sermons and stories. Never, ever, did I expect to literally follow in his footsteps. Yet this summer, along with my daughter Stephanie and our member Phil Glick, that is exactly what I did. Together we proudly represented you in America's Journey for Justice.

The Journey for Justice is an 867-mile walk organized by the NAACP, from Selma, Alabama, to Washington D.C. We marched to raise awareness because 21st century America is not yet a land of liberty and justice for all. And we marched to strengthen our commitment to change the policies, laws and cultural mores that enshrine racism in this country. Like most participants, we did not walk the entire length of the journey, but just for one long day.

The Journey for Justice is peaceful activism, focused on issues that are important for all Americans: a fair justice system, equal access to a quality education, voting rights and a living wage. We shouldn't have to march, but new voting regulations have effectively disenfranchised some of the poorest black Americans. We shouldn't have to march, but a significant number of African-Americans have been harassed and arrested by police without cause, and some have died

¹ This sermon was inspired not only by my participation in the Journey for Justice, but also by the writings of my colleagues: "The Yetzer of Racism" by Rabbi Jason Rosenberg and "Living in the Shadow of Ferguson" by Rabbi Jim Bennett. I am grateful to both for sharing their wisdom and insight.

while in custody. We shouldn't have to march, but black Americans were murdered in their Charleston church after welcoming a white supremacist into their midst and studying Bible together. We shouldn't have to march, but even if none of these things had happened this year, black people still face a whole slew of unspoken cultural barriers and prejudices that make it virtually impossible to climb the socio-economic ladder.

We Jews are no strangers to injustice, and the Reform movement has been deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement since its inception. Reform Rabbis marched with Dr. King and other great civil rights leaders, and some were arrested for their trouble. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were both drafted in the Washington offices of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. Both were tremendous gains, landmark changes to civic policies and national laws in support of equality. Yet, now, fifty years later, we live in a nation that has quietly undone many of these gains - if not in name then in practice.

The call to action was like the blast of the *shofar*. The Religious Action Center asked for one rabbi to walk with a Torah each day of the march. More than two hundred of us answered the call!

Ten rabbis joined the march on August 27th. When we encountered groups of people along the road we would all chant, "What does diversity look like? This is what diversity looks like! What does freedom look like? This is what freedom looks like! What does luuuuuv look like? This is what luuuuuv looks like!" I began to see that each and every person we encountered was an opportunity, and that the message was spreading organically with every new interaction.

Then something changed. We stopped and were warned about a group of people up ahead who, "did not exactly share our agenda." 'Rosebud protocols' were invoked: do not engage, stay silent, stay in formation, stay peaceful, no pictures or video - show them the best of who we are. We were reminded that they are exercising their constitutional right to free speech just as we are, that we had to respect that right, and that we should not forget that we too are speaking - with every step we take. We fell back into formation, and walked for about a half mile to what I assume was the center of town: a gas station with some kind of general store across the street. About a dozen people were gathered at the gas station, where they booed us. To be honest, it was a pretty

weak protest. We left them far behind, yet, something intangible had changed. I got the sense from some of the people we walked with that they would never wander by themselves here, for fear of physical harm. Several folks said that they thought the police escort tamped things down.

We stopped for lunch in the next town up, where the bus met us in a parking lot next to a small supermarket. I could see the bag lunches that had been prepared for us in the luggage compartment, but we never opened them. Why? Because, Cody Weaver, the owner of the supermarket along with her parents, was so horrified by the protest against us at the gas station that she wanted to make up for it by giving us lunch. I have to tell you, with hope as a condiment, boiled hotdogs (all beef of course) and chopped salad never tasted so good.

The rest of the march was uneventful. We continued to do our best to interact with everyone we encountered - raising awareness of the issues. Stephanie spent time getting to know a man named Royal, who has a son about her age. Both kids are learning how to drive. However, where I worry about Stephanie learning to drive safely, Royal worries about his son getting pulled over by the police.

I did not know where I was, physically or spiritually. At no point during the day could I have pointed to a map and said, "we are here." I still don't know! While on the march I was in a world that is just as real as my own, and yet from which I have been sheltered for almost fifty years. The verse began to spin around in my mind: "My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt ..." (Deut. 26:5) I began to understand how far we are from the Promised Land.

Remember how in the seventies and eighties feminism began to change the way our culture looked at women? Then, this past year, we all witnessed an epic turnaround regarding marriage equality. There is still a massive amount of work to do to truly create workplace and cultural equality for women, and complete acceptance for LGBTQ people in American society. Yet, we would not be where we are without significant cultural shifts that moved mainstream America from intolerance, towards tolerance and then towards acceptance.

While we are a long way from Jim Crow and the 1960s, this national shift in culture still has not happened for black people in white America. I believe, firmly and with all of my heart that

simply passing new laws and creating new policies will never solve the problem - at least not completely. We can and should support the Voting Rights Enhancement Act, and local initiatives like Say Yes to Education Buffalo. However, we also need a national change in mindset. We need to develop the same sorts of awareness about racial injustice that we have been working to internalize about gender injustice and sexual orientation injustice. And we need to recognize the unintentional roles we play in continuing to maintain the *status quo*. This is a *teshuvah* that I need to make this year, and if you are anything like me, then it is one you need to make as well.

We prefer to think of racism as hurtful behavior by bad people. Most racism is far more subtle. It is not about bad people or good people; it is about regular people accepting a system that codifies racist views and practices under the veneer of civilization. We certainly do not see ourselves as racist, and we mean it when we decry bigotry. However, if we benefit from a system that is skewed in favor of white people, and pursue our dreams without considering the people who are left behind by that very same system, then we are part of the problem.

When Shauna and I moved here, we selected our neighborhood so that our kids could go to a 'good' school. We never thought twice about the many kids who do not have that option in Western New York. I don't regret that we live in a 'nice' neighborhood, or that our kids are in the Williamsville School District. I do regret that our school is not more diverse, that it is not accessible to so many other kids who need it, and that our kids are being raised inside the same white bubble that we were. I regret, that I have allowed myself to forget: "My father was a wandering Aramean, he went down to Egypt ... the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us." (Deut. 26:5)

Study after study has demonstrated how the cards are stacked against African Americans. Black males are 21 times more likely to be shot by police than white males. We might say, well that is because they are more likely to commit a crime. That answer is the subtle racism of white privilege. According to the statistics, black men are *not* 21 times more likely to be involved in a violent crime than white men. In other studies, identical resumes with black sounding names and white sounding names were periodically sent to a wide range of job placement agencies, and which ones do you think got more responses? Actors calling banks using voices that sounded

‘black’ or ‘white,’ with the same financial information were often only approved for the same loan when they used their ‘white’ voice. We have all been raised in this environment, in this culture. We are not consciously aware of it, it is subtle, but it is real.

Black lives matter, black jobs matter, black schools matter, black votes matter. These are the slogans of the Journey for Justice and they are not just about black people – they are about all people. Every life matters, every job, every school and every vote.

There has been real debate lately about racial profiling and police brutality on the one side, and on the other side about rising crime that an increasingly isolated police force needs to somehow confront. I want to be clear. I think that most police officers serve with integrity, and put their lives on the line every day for you and me. But imagine if our reality were the same as Royal’s, who worries about his son driving. Imagine if we had to have the ‘talk’ as it is commonly called, with our children, telling them how to avoid confrontation and escalation with police. Smile, but not too much. Keep your hands out of your pockets and your hoodie down. Don’t move your hands too quickly and never turn your back. Imagine if we didn’t feel protected by the law, but rather threatened by it every single day. Many of us, perhaps most of us, have remained isolated behind an invisible racial line that separates us: we have stayed in the bubble of white privilege. I know that this is true of me.

“My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt ... The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us.” (Deut. 26:5-6)

We read these words at every *seder* to remember how God saved us with a great and mighty outstretched arm, and to sensitize us to the pain and suffering of our neighbors. We read these words to remember that we have not yet reached the Promised Land; that we are still in Egypt; that we will never be free until all of us are free.

For real change, we must work to develop justice in our local relationships with our neighbors; and that means acknowledging our own hidden racism, buried deep within us. If we ignore that racism, we simply give it permission to carry on as usual. This is incredibly difficult, not only because it is not culturally acceptable, but because it is personally painful. Yet, as Mordecai

Kaplan so wisely taught, *teshuvah* is nothing less than “the continual remaking of human nature.”²

Our inclination is to become defensive, to put up our guard, to be strident in our denials. Our defensiveness, and the reality it denies are all part of being human. We default towards seeing the world in terms of us and them: Jew or non-Jew, rich or poor, gay or straight, black or white. The goal here is not guilt, but honesty. The goal is not providing *them* with services, but instead *being* equal, *being* just, *being* human together. “My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt ... The Egyptians dealt harshly with *us* and oppressed *us*; they imposed heavy labor upon *us*.” (Deut. 26:5-6)

We are no better, no worse than anyone else. When we recognize this not only in our minds but in our hearts, when we feel the outrages with which our neighbors live day in and day out, then our hearts will surely break. And with broken hearts we will hear the shofar's call to justice, and move through the broken notes of *shevarim* and *teruah* towards the long unbroken *tekiah gedolah* - the sound of extended wholeness, of the world as God intended it to be. Then truly, the year 5776 will become a *shanah tovah*.

² Kaplan, Mordecai. *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1937, p. 178)