

Blacks and Jews
Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
January 30, 2016
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My mother was there.

A little more than fifty years ago, in August, 1963, in Washington, D.C., my mother was there.

She heard, in person, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech.

Dr. King was one of my mother’s heroes.

On a hot day that long ago August, my mother rode a train from Connecticut to Washington, D.C. to participate in the freedom march led by Dr. King. My mother and her minister were the only two white people she saw on that train. Being there for that speech was one of the proudest moments of my mother’s life.

My mother not only admired Dr. King. She also worked for racial justice.

In the 1950’s there was a program in New York City called “Fresh Air.” It still exists. The program matches inner city kids with suburban families. The family hosts a couple of kids for a week in the summer, giving them a chance to get out of the city and get some fresh air.

My family lived in Darien, Connecticut. Darien was a restricted community. By a so-called “gentlemen’s agreement” among the real estate agents, no Jews or blacks could buy or rent in Darien.

We were hosts to dark-skinned Puerto Rican children for a week at a time over several summers through the Fresh Air program. Some of our neighbors in Darien were hostile to my mother because of this. One of them said to her, in great anger, “How can you have those children in your house? Don’t you know you will never get that color out of your sheets?”

My mother was thrilled to witness the thousands of people of all colors who marched together in Washington in August, 1963, and gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial to hear Dr. King’s deeply inspiring speech.

Who could forget these words, spoken that day?

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. We have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

Dr. King concluded the speech with words that have inspired millions:

I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

I remember the sad morning five years later that we woke to the news that Dr. King had been murdered.

Dr. King died that day in 1968. The question for us is whether his dream died then also. Where is our nation today on racial justice in comparison to where it was fifty years ago?

We are not doing so well.

President John F. Kennedy asked in 1963, "If a Negro cannot enjoy the full and free life that all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?"

That question continues to be relevant.

Forty years ago whites could expect to have lives that were eight years longer than blacks. Today whites can expect to live four years longer. By the measure of how long we live, blacks and whites are less unequal than they were, but whites continue to live longer than blacks.

Who among us would be content to change the color of our skin?

The rate of infant mortality among African Americans is twice as high as it is among whites. Twice as high.

Who among us?

Last year in Ferguson, Missouri, a white police officer searching for a convenience-store robber shot and killed an unarmed black teenager, 18-year-old Michael Brown. That incident sparked a national movement to protest police treatment of African Americans.

One year later, it remains true that unarmed black men are seven times more likely than whites to die by police gunfire. Black men accounted for 40 percent of the 60 unarmed deaths last year, even though they make up just 6 percent of the U.S. population.

Who among us?

And yet, despite the crying need for justice, and despite the great worth we as Jews place on the value of justice, Jews are not as involved in the fight for civil rights as we were one or two generations ago.

This theme was explored in an article in the Israeli paper Ha'aretz last month. The headline was "Do black lives matter to U.S. Jews, too?" The article explores why Jews are not as visible in the fight for racial justice today as we were 50 years ago.

A speaker at the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington described the Jewish community's historical commitment to racial justice. After the speech, an older African-American woman approached him. "Thank you," she said. "I didn't think the Jewish community still cared."

The American Jewish community was proud of its participation in the fight for civil rights half a century ago, but we have been largely invisible in the fight for racial justice today.

Many mainstream Jewish institutions, synagogues and leaders have been slow to support the Black Lives Matter movement. The hesitation reflects a shift in communal priorities over the past half-century, as well as in collective American-Jewish identity.

Fifty years ago, Jews accounted for a disproportionate number of the movement's white supporters. We showed up at marches and freedom rides, contributed significant funds to civil rights organizations, and took leadership roles in advancing the legal fight for civil rights through the courts and in Congress.

Even today, when young Jews learn about civil rights, they learn about it through a Jewish lens. They focus on stories where Jews are central, like the 1964 murder of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, the two young Jewish civil rights workers who were killed by members of the KKK along with James Chaney, a young black activist. Or they learn about visible figures like Rabbi Israel Dresner and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched at Selma and came to represent the entire Jewish community.

Today we face a new challenge to our efforts to participate in this great cause for justice. That challenge is the support for the Palestinian cause by many in the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly the younger members. They identify with Palestinians and speak out against Israel. Some of them claim that the lives of Palestinians are similar to the lives of blacks in a racist America. They want to make common cause with the Palestinians and demonize Israel by claiming it is racist or even runs an apartheid regime.

Last October the Washington Post reported on the growing solidarity between Palestinian activists and members of the Black Lives Matter movement. Pro-Palestinian signs showed up at demonstrations in Ferguson last year and, in January, several Black Lives Matter leaders visited the West Bank.

This has led some Jews to steer clear of Black Lives Matter events. Though desiring to participate in the current racial justice movement, they are wary of wading into yet another space where one's views on Israel become a litmus test of commitment.

Beyond Israel, there's also institutional discomfort around the tactics and structure of Black Lives Matter. The Jewish community has enjoyed a long relationship with the NAACP, which counts several Jews among its founders and early members. But that organization's focus on Washington lobbying and non-disruptive change is not what Black Lives Matter is preaching, nor how it operates as a decentralized consortium.

The Jewish community's internal tensions around Israel and the hesitation or delay of major Jewish institutions in supporting Black Lives Matter and affiliated efforts have left many Jews unsure of how to engage with today's racial justice movement. But we still feel compelled to do so, in part because of the Jewish community's rich history with civil rights.

The question now for Jewish leaders is how to harness the nostalgia of Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights era to inspire an honest reckoning with the geographic, demographic and political changes that have occurred in the Jewish American community since then.

I come back to John F. Kennedy's question. That question provides the simplest and at the same time most powerful way to think about this issue. He asked, in essence, "If you are white, would you be willing to change your color?" This is the same question in a different guise as the wisdom of Hillel more than two millennia ago. He identified the central value of Judaism to be this: "What is hateful to yourself, do not do unto others."

We have advanced in this country's long journey from slavery to emancipation, from a time when blacks had no voice in the political process to hard-won victories in legislatures and in voting registration to a time when we have a black president.

I urge us to raise our voices against racial injustice while also telling the truth about Israel to those misguided black activists who make the claim that Israel is racially oppressing Palestinians.

America has a long way to go to achieve racial justice. We Jews should continue to be part of the fight to make that happen.