

**Emerging From Our Cave of Comfort  
Reflections on Race in the United States<sup>1</sup>**

Two years ago one of our members adopted a black baby boy. She gave me permission to share this story. This summer we spoke about the racial tensions that have surfaced in the last year. She told me that she has been concerned about how she - a white Jewish woman - could prepare her black Jewish son for the realities he will face.

She asked a male black colleague - a vice-president of her company - for advice. And he told her: "when your son takes a picture for his driver's license, he needs to look as conservative as possible. Hair cut. Button down shirt. Because when he gets pulled over by the police, and he will, that will be the first picture that they will see." And he told her to teach her son to smile, because people are scared of angry black men. But he warned, "don't teach him to smile too wide, because black men who look too happy also look suspicious." Calm. Collected. He needs a half smile.

With tears in her eyes, she asked me, "how do I teach my child to have a half smile?" It's a heartbreaking story, isn't it?

Her story broke my heart because I know what I want for my own children - to think that my children would be unable to become their full selves, unable to express themselves, their joys, their pain, their sadness. I imagine my children fearing how people see them and judge them, not by the content of their character, but by the color of their skin.

Fredrick Douglass once said, "that the work [of equality] does not end with the abolition of slavery."<sup>2</sup> It's been over 150 years since the Emancipation Proclamation and the freedom given to American slaves. Systemic inequalities and racism did not end with the Civil War. Fredrick Douglas was right, old hatreds die hard.

As we know, Temple's own Rabbi Lefkowitz fought against the KKK in the 1920's. In state after state, including in Texas, restrictive legislation regarding segregation, intermarriage, land ownership, and voting rights dominated the American landscape. From Brown vs. Board of Education to Rosa Parks to sit-ins and marches, every aspect of the Civil Rights movement leading up to the Civil Rights Act was geared towards righting these wrongs.

Rabbi Levi Olan was deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement. He housed Freedom Riders and marched with Martin Luther King Jr.. Clearly, the passage of the Civil Rights Act did not mark the end of the journey, either. Because 239 years after the Founding of our country and 150 years after the Civil War, 50 Years after the Selma to Montgomery March, and nearing the end of our country's first black President we find ourselves in this pivotal moment.

---

<sup>1</sup> Collaboratively written by Rabbis Asher Knight and Kim Herzog Cohen

<sup>2</sup> The Work of the Future, *Douglas' Monthly*. November 1862

Whether it was the massacre at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston or the black lives that have been lost in Ferguson, MO, Staten Island, NY, Baltimore, MD, and Waller County, TX, this year highlighted for us how far we have to go.

Racism is like a parched forest. When a match is lit – there is enough fuel for a powerful and destructive fire. For too long we have permitted people to be humiliated because of the color of their skin. We've underfunded education and job training programs. We have invested more in white areas of town than black areas of town. We've applied the law in unequal ways. And we've allowed our criminal justice system to imprison black men at rates that are outrageously unbalanced with the same crimes committed by white men. Prejudice ultimately ends up in violent catastrophe.

Haven't we had enough?: Enough of the cultural conditions that define who is beautiful – leaving out minority populations. Enough of the systemic and structural conditions that perpetuate pain through economic injustice. Enough of the painful and tragic breakouts of racism that have ended in death. Don't we want our children to grow up in a world where the images we've been seeing this year – and the racial inequalities that continue to plague our country – are a thing of history books and not tomorrows news? Don't we want our children to feel safe *enough* to smile?

In moments like these, we often turn to the heroes of our tradition, seeking inspiration and hope. Among the greatest is our prophet, Elijah. He is the harbinger of the Messiah. He restores faith, he punishes the wicked, he inspires goodness. During our Passover *seder*, he enters our homes as a guest, mysteriously drinking wine from a special glass.

In one of the most well-known Elijah stories, the wicked Queen Jezebel is enraged that Elijah challenges her authority.<sup>3</sup> So, she threatens to kill him. Elijah flees to the south to Mount Horev. He hides in a cave - alone and scared. God instructs Elijah to come out of the cave and stand upon the mountain. And then we read: *There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks.... but Adonai was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire—a Still Small Voice.*

The courage it took to step out of the cave is a decisive moment in this story. He could have stayed confined within the cocoon of what he knows. But instead, Elijah steps out to face the violent wind, the shattering earthquake, and the consuming fire. Because he did, he heard the Still Small Voice, calling to his soul.

Martin Luther King once said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 19:1-21

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*, 1963

Like Elijah, we all have a tendency to draw back into the cave of comfort, and place blinders on our eyes. We are all drawn to the security of what we know. But during our *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, the piercing cry of the *shofar* calls to us, demands of us, to open our hearts and souls to the burning realities of our world.

The potential for change is right before us. The potential for moral imagination is right before us. The shofar beckons us to come out of our cave, and to come face to face with ourselves, our community, and our Creator. But it's hard, because within the cave we find great comfort.

From the time that I opened my eyes, I've been in a white Jewish world. From the hospital in which I was born, which my grandfather founded, to the hired help - I've consistently received this subtle message. Growing up in Denver, I went to a private school. At the private school, most of the black children, though not all, were on scholarship. It was evident through clothes, and shoes, and after school activities. At the public high school I attended, the honors and AP classes were also essentially white. My neighborhood was largely white.

So, in college, feeling sheltered, I decided to get involved in organizations that were more diverse than I had previously experienced. I remember talking to a black friend of mine who was upset after he had gone into a store wearing a hooded sweatshirt. He had been followed by security. He told me that it was nothing new. "Really," I said. "That happens? Like, more than once?" I remember the silence and his glare of love and frustration. And it "clicked" in my head, in a way that it hadn't before.

For me, racism had been about racist people acting in immoral ways. As a moral, upstanding person, I wasn't racist. Clearly, I'm not advocating for a whiter America! I wasn't the white store-clerk, calling security to follow a black patron, simply because of the color of his skin and what he was wearing. But in that exchange, my eyes were opened to something profound:

I'm white. I've lived with many privileges. Even though my Jewish family has worked hard for what we have, I really don't know what's it's like to be a black man. As stigmatized and as targeted as we may have been throughout Jewish history, being a white Jewish man, born in the United States, I became accustomed to my privileges. In fact, I became comfortable overlooking the subtle and not so subtle ways they shaped me. Living in a cave can be comfortable.

That's precisely why conversations about racism are difficult and don't resolve our problems quickly. Twelve years ago at this season, Rabbi Stern challenged us to face this very issue, saying: "[The conversation] demands that we hold up a mirror to ourselves, because it requires us to examine how we classify others. It is difficult because it touches on some of the most controversial questions of individual and social responsibility: Why is it that some groups have not climbed the American ladder of opportunity with the same success as others? The

conversation is difficult because though we have come a long way.....the less obvious, more entrenched vestiges of injustice and fear have proved harder to overcome.”<sup>5</sup>

Temple has a long tradition of facing racism. We know this is not something that is addressed in any single decade, in any single sermon, or any single march. It requires the hard work of returning back to ourselves and to the evolving realities of American life, knowing there are no shortcuts or easy answers.

At this critical juncture, we invite you to join in that work. This year [Sh'ma Emanu-El](#) will be discussing [Big Questions](#) about how we are living our lives, and how we are making personal changes in the year to come. With members, we will discuss questions like “Why Bother?,” “What advantages do you have?,” “What do we choose to ignore?.” For a taste of the small group experience, come to our Yom Kippur Conversation at 12:30pm on Yom Kippur day. We will have matching events, to form new Sh'ma Groups in November.

[Just Congregations](#) is beginning to work with black churches in South Dallas and Hispanic churches in East Dallas to have conversations across lines of race and class. If these issues matter to you, if your heart was broken by what you have seen this past year, then I encourage you to [sign-up](#) on the Temple website, under Repairing the World tab – where you will find Just Congregations. Our leaders will follow-up with you.

Finally, our rabbis and congregants recently participated in a march from Selma to DC this summer. 860 miles in total, the march was coordinated by the NAACP with the help of the Reform Jewish Movement. Our hope is to connect our local efforts here in Dallas to the national issues that our Movement will be advocating for in the months to come. Stay tuned for ways you can act in support of our Movement's advocacy efforts.

There is a story about Kivie Kaplan, a great Reform Jewish activist and philanthropist who served as president of the NAACP. Kivie Kaplan was on a trip in the South and 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. No Dogs." 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 - he had to work to make a change.<sup>6</sup>

We have to begin with ourselves – to recognize the caves that we are in – to know that we didn't lay the foundations for the caves. We didn't carve the walls that separate us. But by standing in the cave, un-phased and unmoved, we may become complicit in their very existence. It's time to step-out and feel the clap of thunder, and the heat of the fire and let the Still Small Voice call out to our conscience. Every time a person is hurt, every time a person is degraded, every time a person is discriminated against, every time justice is unfairly applied - we are all responsible.

---

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi David Stern, Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 2003 (5764)

<sup>6</sup> Told to me by Rabbis David Segal and Jonah Pesner.

With God's strength, with the power of community, with the courage and conviction deep within us, we can be audacious in our spirit and bring greater healing to our parched cities and to this great nation. May we do so, as our tradition so powerfully demands of every generation. May we do so, with solidarity, courage, and resolve.

Please join, as we pray for our country, with the first paragraph on page, 272.

God of holiness, we hear Your message: *Justice, Justice, you shall pursue*. God of freedom, we hear your charge: *Proclaim liberty throughout the land*. Inspire us through Your teachings and commandments to love and uphold our precious democracy. Let every citizen take responsibility for the rights and freedoms we cherish. Let each of us be an advocate for justice, an activist for liberty, a defender of dignity. And let us champion the values that make our nation a haven for the persecuted, a beacon of home among the nation.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, CCAR. 2015