

### WHY I MARCHED

Last week I promised you that I would say something about my experience this summer on the Journey for Justice. To do that, I first want to remind you of what I said in the e-letter I sent you explaining why I was going.

Many years ago I was speaking with a friend about his experience at the Million Man March, a call for African-American men of every socio-economic level to come to Washington DC and accept responsibility for their lives. He told me that the most powerful thing about the event for him was being surrounded by so many people who not only looked like him, but shared similar values. It's something that he did not experience all that often. Here in Tarrytown, he felt he was often looked at askance simply because he was black. I told him that I sometimes had a similar feeling when walking in public wearing my kippah. He replied "Yes, but the difference is that you can remove your kippah whenever you want and blend in. I can't remove being black."

I have never forgotten that conversation. One of the many things that has allowed Jews to do so well in America is that we look like the majority. We can blend in. It's one of the things that falls under the category of "white privilege," and it is something we take for granted.

We Jews tend to think of ourselves as among the oppressed, and certainly many times we have been. But even the anti-Semitism that we have dealt with in this country does prepare us to fully understand the breadth and depth of racism in America. There is a story told about Kivie Kaplan, a great Reform Jewish activist and philanthropist, a founder of the Religious Action Center, who later served as president of the NAACP. As he told it, the final catalyst for his activism was this: Kivie Kaplan was on a business trip in the South and was picked up at the airport by a black cab driver. Their route took them along a road in a wealthy neighborhood lined with country clubs. Sign after sign at the gates 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 was more than a half-century ago. So much has changed. But much has not. Just this year a colleague shared a conversation he recently had with one of his temple members who had adopted a black baby boy. She told him 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. He should look calm. Collected. He needs a half smile."

With tears in her eyes, she asked my colleague, "how do I teach my child to have a half smile?"

Folks who look like me never have to think about things like this. That is white privilege. Walking through the aisles of a store without being eyed suspiciously by a security guard because of the color of my skin – that is white privilege. Martin Luther King had a vision of an America in which people are judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. The events of the past year – the deaths of unarmed black men in Ferguson, on Staten Island, in Baltimore, in Texas, the shootings inside a Charleston church – all of these remind me that 150 years after the Civil War, 50 years after the march from Selma to Montgomery and nearing the end of the administration of our country's first black President – all of this reminds me while much has changed, having black skin can still be a liability in America.

In 1965 the Voting Rights Act, written in the offices of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center, was signed into law. It protected access to the ballot box in states that had historically sought to limit that access. We thought we had won. But two years ago the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act, saying it was no longer necessary. Almost immediately North Carolina, no longer under Federal scrutiny, passed new restrictions on voting access, all of which disproportionately impact people of color. 50 years after the battle was won, voting rights are once again under attack, access to education is uneven, and African-American parents have to teach their law-abiding children how to speak to the police to keep from being shot.

It was to call attention to all of this that the NAACP organized America's Journey for Justice, a 45-day, 867 mile march from Selma, Alabama to Washington DC. The Central Conference of American Rabbis partnered with the NAACP, and nearly 200 rabbis participated, carrying a Torah scroll for the entire route. The march ended last week. On Rosh Hashanah, the Torah scroll that we carried was read in Temple Micah in Washington DC.

So now you know what the march was. And you know the reason it was necessary. But what I really want to tell you this morning is why I decided that I needed to participate. I want to tell you why I marched. And to do that I need to go back a few years to the sermon I gave on Martin Luther King Jr. Day at the Foster Memorial AME Zion Church in Tarrytown. I was honored to be invited to preach, and I wondered what I could tell that congregation about Dr. King that they didn't already know. So instead, I decided to remind them of the once-close connection between Jews and Blacks. I said:

I want to start by speaking about Abraham. Not Father Abraham from the Bible. A different Abraham, a rabbi and a good friend of Martin's. I want to tell you about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a man who marched with Reverend King in Selma, and who shared his vision of a better America.

They came from very different worlds: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was a Polish immigrant, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was an American descendant of slaves. They came from different religious traditions: Dr. Heschel was descended from a long line of Chasidic Rabbis; Dr. King was a fourth generation Protestant preacher. Their origins could not have been more different. But they shared a belief that religion is not just about beliefs and prayers; religion is not meant to be limited to the churches and

synagogues; religion is not just about asking God to do something for us. No, for Dr. Heschel and Dr. King religion speaks in the voice of the Hebrew prophets. Religion is only of use if it calls us to seek justice and righteousness; religion is only of use if it sends us out from our houses of worship to make the world a better place; religion is only of use if we ask God what we can do for Him. And that is the reason that these two men – the white Polish rabbi and the black American Reverend marched side-by-side from Selma to Montgomery to protest the racism that poisoned America and humiliated its African-American citizens. During that march, a host of white citizens, filled with venom, surrounded the marchers, calling them names and spitting on them. It must have been a terrifying experience. But when Heschel was later asked how he felt, he said, “When I marched in Selma, I felt as if my feet were praying.” It was important not only to protest against evil, but to be seen protesting. Faith in the goodness and oneness of God is expressed through the language of feet, hands and spine. In the words of Rabbi Harold Schulweis, God must not only be believed; God must be behaved.

The friendship between those two men transcended their differences, because they shared that prophetic idea – Belief is not enough – it must lead to action. God must be behaved.

I felt really good about that sermon. I hadn't messed it up. I got into the cadence a little. They loved it. TBA members who were there loved it. It was a great moment. And then? Nothing. Nothing followed it. I had spoken passionately and movingly and even impressively about the idea that God must be behaved. And then I didn't do anything. My relationship with that pastor, our relationship with that church – nothing developed. We moved on. And when first Ferguson and then each of the other incidents happened, we were not in a position to do anything. So that's the first reason I marched this summer. Belief is not enough. God must be behaved.

The second reason I marched has to do with Judaism itself. The texts of our people serve as the basis for much of the world's morality. In particular, the words of our prophets decry the hypocrisy of thinking that empty ritual can substitute for moral behavior. Another excerpt from my sermon at Foster:

Dr. King's role models were the Hebrew prophets. In his sermons we can hear the thundering voice of the prophet Amos: “Let justice well up as waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Whenever Dr. King raised his voice, he would invoke the Hebrew prophets, who denounced, in God's name, the discrimination and oppression of the poor, the weak, the widow, the orphan, the hungry, the homeless. (Elkins) This is what we have in common, Jew and Gentile, White and African-American, all people of good faith: a desire to see this great country live out the promise of its founding, to become a place of justice and righteousness for all its citizens. We need, all of us, to start working together again.

And that's why I marched this summer– in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets.

In the spring of 1964, Dr. King sent a plea to the Reform Rabbis' annual convention. He had been fighting segregation in St. Augustine, which he called one of the most challenging and violent places he had been. He wrote directly to the rabbis saying, "We need you down here!" After the message was read aloud at the convention, 16 rabbis left the meeting and traveled directly to Florida to lend their support. They knew a prophetic call when they heard one. One of the rabbis, Jerrold Goldstein, remembers the welcome they received when they arrived: "Here come Moses' people!"

Yet only two years later, Charles Silberman, the editor of Forbes, said in an address to the Rabbinical Assembly:

"I fear that we Jews are resting too much on past laurels. We think of ourselves as being in the vanguard of the fight for civil rights, for racial equality and justice. And for a long time we were. We take justifiable pride in the fact that, as Heinrich Heine put it, "since the Exodus, Freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent." But that Hebrew accent, like so many other parts of Jewish life and tradition, is beginning to weaken and fade."

And that too is why I marched: because the words and the accent of the prophets are being lost.

I marched because God must be behaved, and so that my own behavior might improve. I marched, carrying a Torah, as a representative of this congregation, of the Jewish people and of the prophetic tradition which calls on us to let justice well up as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream. And, I marched because my kids were watching.

I have been speaking to them about our responsibility to promote justice for their whole lives. Now, when a call comes out for action, can I ignore it? Not a chance. Even if I hadn't wanted to go, I would have gone. I know that this is part of the reason that Ben and Amelia Gross came and marched. And I was thrilled that my boys, Yoni and Avi, were willing to come as well.

It was a remarkable experience. For safety along the road, we had to walk in two columns, so our marching partners changed frequently. The conversations we had with these folks were often fascinating, as were their stories and their reasons for marching. I met Ruth, an 85 year old Jewish woman from Brooklyn. She was marching the entire North Carolina leg, just over a week's worth of walking 20 miles a day. She was doing it because marching and protesting was something she has always done. Today she is a senior member of a group known as the Raging Grannies.

The most colorful person we met was a man named Middle Passage, a 68-year-old disabled veteran who had taken a bus more than 1300 miles from his home in Colorado to Selma, and was planning to walk the entire 867 miles. I don't know what his given name was, but at some point in his life he changed his name to honor the slaves forced to make the harrowing journey, known by that title, from Africa to America. In an interview given along the way, he said he was marching to ensure that the US constitution – and the prospect of the American dream – remained protected. And

indeed, he marched every day at the head of the line, carrying a large American flag. 20 miles, every day.

Reflecting on the diverse group of marchers, he said, “We’re from all different walks of life, coming together for one common cause. We’re working together as a unit for the betterment and justice of everybody regardless of race, creed, color, or religion. We’re all in this together.” He felt particularly strongly about preserving and strengthening voting rights. “Voting is the most important right we have. It’s been altered. It’s harder for us, for the whole population of the United States, to vote. We’ve all got to work together to preserve what we have. It’s a struggle. Freedom is not free.” Middle Passage said that every step he took on this march was a step further along the path of preserving rights for all.

What I would did not know and never would have guessed when I tried to keep up with him in the 90 degree North Carolina sun was that Middle Passage had undergone five open-heart surgeries since the early 1980s. Just ten days after we met him, he had a fatal heart attack while carrying the flag in Virginia, three days from DC. I was stunned when I heard the news, and I’ve been reflecting on it ever since. I’m still proud that I took the time and made the effort to march. And I’m humbled at the difference between my commitment and his, what I was risking – not much – and what he was risking. Not just for his people, but for America.

This summer I marched because God must be behaved, I marched as a representative of the Jewish people, and I marched to be an example to my children. And there was one more reason: I marched in order to have something to tell you this morning, on the Day of Atonement.

As difficult as it is for us to admit our personal sins, it is even harder for us to take personal responsibility for the sins of society. First, we have to be able to see them. Many cannot see that there is still racism and discrimination and white privilege here in America. And even when we do see it, and believe it, it is our nature to deny our own part in it. We consider ourselves good people; we are good people. We, personally, are not the cause of discrimination; in fact, we Jews have often been the victims. We Jews know that justice stands at the core of our faith and our commitments. We want to act, and many of us have and do, but many of us also find ourselves immobilized and overwhelmed by the complexity and the challenge of the task that lies before us. There are so many nuances, so many complexities. We know that part of our law enforcement system is broken, yet we know police officers and others, members of our congregational family, and we know that they are not broken. We know that the justice system is far from just, all the time, for all people, but we also know many good people who work in and on behalf of the system. We know that there are places where the education system is broken, yet of our children go to excellent schools that work. The balance of economic justice is uneven yet we don’t know how to begin to effect change. [Jim Bennet]

All true. But as the saying goes, if we’re not part of the solution then we’re part of the problem. Or, more eloquently, in the words of Elie Wiesel: We must take sides.

Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

There are things we can do, one small step at a time. Sign and mail the card asking our representatives to restore the voting rights act. Pay attention to the seemingly small acts of discrimination which happen around us every day. Look for them – you will surely find them. Speak out when acts of violence take place; do not just wring your hands and discuss it among yourselves. You are the inheritors of a great prophetic tradition – let your voices be heard.

Eternal God, Creator of all the peoples of the earth, we hear Your message: “Justice, Justice, you shall pursue.” God of freedom, we hear Your charge: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land. On this holy day, on every day, inspire us to work to make real the values of our tradition, the values of our nation. May every citizen take responsibility for the rights and freedoms we cherish. Help each of us be an advocate for justice, an activist for liberty, a defender of dignity. May we be the generation that brings to pass the words of the prophet, so that justice will well up as waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. [After Mishkan ha-Nefesh, p 272]