

## A Civil Rights Mission To the Deep South

A civil rights mission with the Jewish Council of Public Affairs took me last week to the places where the struggle for civil rights was fought in the 1950's and '60's. When we hear Pittsburgh, Poway, or New Zealand we immediately think of the incidents that recently occurred in those places. When we hear the names Montgomery, Selma or Birmingham our association is not just with a geographic locale, but with what transpired there. When we hear of Montgomery, we think of Rosa Parks and the bus boycott because blacks were not allowed to sit in the front of the bus and were required to give up their seats for whites. Selma evokes the imagery of Bloody Sunday and the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which we walked across. Birmingham reminds us of Bull Connor, the sheriff who unleashed dogs and water hoses to deny blacks their rights, while doing nothing to protect blacks and black churches from being bombed.

Our mission began at the Museum of Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta and toured all these places in the Deep South exposing us to the harsh reality of a time when our nation violated and contradicted its promise of equality for all, and the ensuing struggle to force us to live up to our ideals and founding principles.

We learned about the cruelty of human bondage which separated families, where human beings were bought, sold and treated not like human beings, but like property. We bore witness to the way blacks were degraded and humiliated, and the discrimination and suffering they endured after slavery ended. Walking through a monument in Selma with columns representing the hundreds of counties where thousands of blacks were lynched by mobs bent on violence and driven by hate and bigotry was reminiscent of the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Berlin.

Needless to say, such a journey compels us to confront the unfair treatment experienced by blacks. Segregation was rationalized as "separate but equal". But in reality, only one half of that statement was true. Blacks and whites were most definitely kept separate, but the facilities, the education, the opportunities, the treatment was anything but equal. In 1965, at a time when 14,000 blacks lived in Selma, due to discriminatory laws such as the poll tax and literacy tests unfairly administered, designed to deny them the right to vote, only 300 were registered to vote.

Throughout our journey, we encountered the bravery of those who sought to change an abnormal system that had become tolerated as normal. The Freedom Rides, the lunch counter sit-ins, the marches, the peaceful resistance and civil disobedience all were intended to break and bring down an unjust system. The inspiring words and actions of Martin Luther King, who insisted on non-violent resistance and so many others who joined him, some of whom we met, bravely faced brutality, violence, bombings and death threats to fight for civil rights. And yes, we can take pride that Jews were disproportionately represented in the movement for equality.

I came to understand better why the garbage workers in Memphis during Martin Luther King's last campaign carried placards saying, "I am a Man," which in turn helped me better understand the contemporary situation. The striking sanitation workers were making a statement, because they felt the need to remind others that they too are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and should be treated with the respect due any human being. Our Talmud teaches that whoever saves one life saves an entire world, to teach us how important every life is. It wasn't necessary for those who held the keys to power to remind others of this basic fact. But those who were denied basic rights were compelled to carry this message. They were not saying that anyone else is not a man, just asking that others recognize that they too are men. And so, when blacks today say "Black Lives Matter" they are not saying that other lives do not matter. Rather they are sending a message to law enforcement officers and others in communities where, too often people are presumed guilty and are shot without due process, to assert that their lives matter.

Let me share with you the takeaways of such a mission, one which I hope we can take as a congregation in the coming year.

First the questions: One cannot help but wonder how people can see such a system and not realize it is wrong? How can people become immune to such injustice and find ways to justify it? Confronting a different time and era, you cannot help but ask yourself, what would you have done? Where would you have stood? Would you be able to recognize the moral imperative to challenge injustice, or would you have gone along with what everyone else was doing and find a way to support the status quo?

And now for some of the conclusions, thoughts and takeaways:

I came away from the trip impressed by the role of religion and faith. While there were those who misused and misinterpreted biblical texts to justify slavery, the Bible, the preachers, the church, the rabbis, the synagogues, the congregants in places of worship were overwhelmingly inspired to persevere in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. They were encouraged by our narrative, the story of the Israelite slaves standing up to Pharaoh to win their freedom and were motivated by the Hebrew prophets. Martin Luther King in his last speech spoke, like Moses, of going to the mountaintop and looking out on the Promised Land.

We Jews can be inspired by the richness of our heritage, if we but study it. When I was a teenager I was inspired by a teaching from Pirke Avot, which I put on my notebook in high school, "*B'makom she'ein anashim, hishtadel lihiyot ish*: In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man."

So when we wonder what would we do – the answer comes from knowing who we are. Judaism teaches us to remember that we were once slaves, that we were once strangers. We are

commanded to pursue justice. The Talmud describes us as a people who are compassionate and who have empathy for all.

Seeing the picture of my father marching with Martin Luther King has always helped me, as well as my children know where we must stand in the battle for equality and justice.

Seeing the horror inflicted upon others, I thought of the teaching from the prophet about why we are here on earth. He said, "You have not come into being to hate or destroy, but to praise, to labor and to love."

And speaking of the historic connection between the Jewish and black community, our shared common fate, and the difficulties experienced in the years following the civil rights movement which brought us together, I am more determined than ever not to give up on that relationship, and certainly not to cede it to those who hate Israel and Jews and who seek to drive a wedge between us. We have too much in common, including common enemies.

The fight is not over. We learned of the direct line – from slavery to Jim Crow laws of segregation and discrimination and lynchings. But what many of us may not realize is that much of the current criminal justice system and the way in which it is unfairly applied has resulted in an overwhelmingly high rate of incarceration of blacks in this country. In many respects it is an extension and manifestation of the racism that still exists. We are being asked to work with them to help to correct this injustice, and there is much we can and must do in this area.

A number of years ago, Symcha and I led a youth group summer trip to Israel. We were joined the last two weeks by a group of African American kids from Congressman Mickey Leland's inner-city district. Before we left, at the end of our trip, at a campfire, when the kids spoke about their feelings, the black kids told the Jewish kids in our group how lucky they were to have Sunday school and religious school where they learn about their past and who they are. They explained that they felt deprived because they did not have any formal mechanism to learn about their history.

Precisely because of the question of how we would act, I believe it is important to know and to study one's past, to know our history, who we are, where we come from, and the stories of our ancestors who came before us. When we understand where we come from and learn our values, we have an understanding and appreciation of our identity. This in turn, gives us the tools and equips us to respond to whatever issues we are facing.

Some of you may recall when Pastor Haywood Robinson spoke here a few years ago of the verse from the Book of Joshua about fathers telling their sons of their past, and of the 12 stones set up after the crossing of the Jordan River. "In time to come, when our children ask their fathers,

‘What is the meaning of those stones?’ Tell your children: ‘Here the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry land.’”

That night the pastor told the people of his church and members of our congregation that they must learn from the example of the Jewish community the importance of remembering and of the obligation of one generation to tell the story to the next one.

At the edge of the Edmund Pettus Bridge is a monument of twelve stones, with that very same verse from the Book of Joshua. I asked a young black man accompanying us if the verse was well known in black churches, and he told me it was.

It all came full cycle and I understood why the pastor shared that verse with us.

Those who were here that night may recall how I responded. I presented him with a stone from my office and said, “Tonight you have spoken about stones. There are hearts that can be as hard as a stone, and there are stones that have a heart.” I gave him the stone that was in my hand and said, “This stone has a heart. It bears witness and tells a story. I brought it from Auschwitz, and give it to you to take to your church.” I concluded by saying that the Hebrew word for stone is *ehven*, which is a construct of the words *av* and *ben*, which means father and son. Indeed the stones remind us to tell the story to our children, so they will know where we and they come from.

Let us continue to tell the story, to walk the walk, and march the march - the march for justice, together.

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