

ROSH HASHANA DAY
Thursday, September 5, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Every year, and I think I speak for every rabbi, I review the events of the past year to see whether there is some special Jewish insight that I can add.

You know the topics, which came across my desk: Secretary of State John Kerry's major efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian talks, the massive response leading to recovery from Hurricane Sandy, the entire issue of how acts of God overwhelm our human endeavor.

But one theme, as I considered the matter, seemed to emerge as the most significant. The theme is not a particularly Jewish one, but it is one which affects us Jews here in America. In fact, it affects all of us in a profound way. It is the issue of racism in America.

Now I considered spending some time with you discussing the Trayvon Martin case, but that case is extremely complicated. It contains overtones of competence and incompetence, The issue of what does the law really mean. And the frequently noisy rallies, which emerged across the country in the wake of the jury decision to acquit George Zimmerman, which added nothing to our understandings.

Far less significant in national scope, but perhaps more telling, and more to the heart of the matter is the case of television celebrity cook Paula Deen. If you will recall, Paula Deen has been accused to using the "N" word as part of her regular

vocabulary. We, in New York, have long ago separated ourselves from this sort of racist language.

For me, for us, Paula Deen can serve as a symbol of the inherent racism still present in America today.

I. WHAT IS PAULA DEEN?

Symbols are very important. They convey meanings far beyond the word or picture itself.

Let me give you an example. When we see a swastika, it immediately means one thing. It is a Nazi symbol, and when we see that symbol as Jews, it means the Holocaust. It reminds us of six million men, women and children who were killed merely because they were Jews.

I could explain to you that it is a tantric symbol, found in Hinduism, Buddhism, in other religions, meaning "auspiciousness," and that it goes back thousands of years. It could also be a symbol of my "higher self." All that is meaningless. The swastika has a transcendent meaning for Jews and all other who suffered at the hands of the Nazis.

The confederate flag is a similar symbol. If we were to go to a parking lot in any southern state, we would see lots of confederate flags on car bumpers. If you were to ask the drivers of the cars what the meaning of the flag is, they would probably say it is a sign of "southern pride." But for us Northerners, it is a symbol of racism in the South.

So has Paula Deen become such a symbol. Her rise to national prominence in the last eight to ten years has become for me a symbol of the latent racism, and not so latent racism, which exists in certain parts of the country. She is a proof text of the oft-repeated phrase "The Civil War is not yet over."

For many of us, Paula Deen's thick southern accent and her "old south" ways are symbols of the racism that we hoped was

dead. Her style of cooking runs counter to every understanding of how modern adults should eat. That too is characteristic of the “good old days,” days that we yearn for. Days when black people knew their place.

It might be possible coordinate the racism of Paula Deen’s rise with the rise of Barack Obama. As we all know, for many people in this country, the presidency of Barack Obama is an anomaly. A black man in the White House! A black man who is smarter than we are! A black man who is better educated than we are! A black man whose wife is as smart as he, and as well educated as he!

Barack and Michele Obama represent, for racists, every thing that black people are **not** supposed to be.

While for us, Jews living in New York, the Obamas represent the fulfillment of the civil rights movement. African Americans, given the right opportunities, can do as well, and even better than we did.

Robert Caro’s new book about Lyndon Johnson, *The Passage of Power*, reminds us forcefully that the civil rights legislation which most of us applaud enthusiastically, dates only to 1964 and 1965. Civil rights legislation was forced upon the South by Lyndon Baines Johnson. His parliamentary skills were so extraordinary, that he and only he brought an end to segregation and legal racism as we all knew it. Southern Democrats said at that time that the South would be lost to the Democratic Party for at least a generation to come. And they were right. But it is more than one generation already.

New rulings by the Supreme Court now also serve to give new meaning to the notion that civil rights is still a live and unresolved issue in America.

II. PAULA DEEN AS A SYMBOL OF RACISM

I have no knowledge of the factors that lead to Paula Deen's sudden downfall. It certainly wasn't that Paula Deen was suddenly discovered to have said the "N" word. We will probably never know the full story. And it doesn't really matter.

I do believe that the powerful forces supporting racism in the United States are still present in every aspect of American life. Yes, the election of Barack Obama dealt a heavy blow to these backward forces, but they have not been defeated.

Racism affects every aspect of the work of Congress. Racists have learned quickly that blatant expressions of racism are not acceptable to the majority of Americans. The election of Barack Obama not once, but twice, is proof that blatant racism does not go down very well, at least in the so-called "blue states." Our country is still divided by racism.

So, the racists have learned how to cover their deeply felt position by allying themselves with superficially different causes. Let me give you some examples. The reform of immigration laws in this country has long been a priority. Illegal immigration is not the result of clever outlaws trying to invade this country. Illegal immigration, and its consequences, is the result of punitive lawmakers who set up impossible barriers.

In this country, built on the contributions of immigrants, we should welcome newcomers. We should be welcoming immigrants, and we should be doing everything in our power to integrate them into American life.

The racists have allied themselves with those whose punitive nature want to punish “illegal” immigrants. Illegal immigrants should be punished for breaching impossible barriers to their participating in American life. Immigrants represent the “other,” those who have taken our country from us, the “real” Americans. And, to top it off, these new Americans may not vote the “right” way.

The same goes for the restructuring of medical care in this country. There is no person who will argue that the current health care system in American is good for anybody. Not even the insurance companies. The specter of socialism, or socialized medicine, has become a smoke screen thrown in by fear mongers. “Death Panels”, they allege, will take the life and death decisions from us as individuals. And of course, calling the revision of health care in America “Obamacare”, adds that special, and nasty element of racism. Who but a black president – who may really not be a real American -would promote such an un-American idea!

The forces, which tried twice to defeat the election of an African-American as president, have not retreated one iota. They have discovered ways to obscure their real agenda.

Racism is the force which prevents progress in American life. It represents the most backward eras in the history of our country. And it needs to be recognized as such.

III. WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT TO JEWS

Judaism is not a religion in which the individual is the ONLY significant focus. Personal salvation is not a particularly Jewish concern. Jews have never been encouraged to enter monasteries or convents in order to fulfill religious values. Judaism tells us that its true fulfillment is in building a better society.

The betterment of society has always been at the center of Judaism. This commitment helps us to understand our participation in the labor movement in America at the beginning of the 19th century. It undergirds our deep involvement in the civil rights movement in the 20th century.

Racism in America today takes us back to a time in America which embarrasses many people. It is the time of the “Whites Only” water fountains. It is a time in which the repression of one group of people by another was accepted as the norm

We understand today that racism is un-American, and that its values fly in the face of the principles on which this country was founded.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to speak out, and to call the retrograde forces by their true name.

Opposition to immigration reform and opposition to health care reform can be legitimate. None of the immigration bills in Congress is perfect. None of the health care legislation is without issues that must be dealt with.

We must acknowledge the core ideas that oppose these changes in American life. We must recognize the forces which

call for the defeat of progressive legislation as manifestations of racism. These are the forces which seek to defeat our African-American president's legacy. They want historians to say "Look at that African American president. He accomplished nothing!"

CONCLUSION

Continuing Racism in America is not about Paula Deen. She is merely a way for me to bring home to you the insidious presence of racism in America.

The election of an African-American president is, for some people in our country, a battle cry to bring back the “good old days.” The RE-election of Barak Obama means that the retrograde forces in America need to work even harder. They have committed themselves to dig deeper and prevail.

The noble title of “Tea Party” has been sullied by its use by the most backward and un-American forces in America.

The political analysts in Lyndon Johnson’s day were right when they said that the civil rights battle meant Democrats losing the South. The battle continues. The democratic forces in America – with a lower case “d” – need to work harder to keep elections fair, honest and open. Then the forces of equality for all will have a chance to prevail.

It is incumbent on us as Americans to continue the fight. It is incumbent on us as Jews. It is incumbent on us as people deeply concerned about the future of America and the values for which it has always stood. We need to identify racism, call it by its true name. Then, perhaps we will fulfill the hopes and dreams of our ancestors who made the perilous journey to America, and the ideals of our founding fathers.