

YOM KIPPUR MORNING
Wednesday, September 23, 2015

I really haven't counted, but this year will probably be the fiftieth time that I have conducted High Holy Day services.

But the first year still stands out in my mind. Yes, it was the first time I was sent by the Hebrew Union College to officiate. I had finished my first year of graduate school. And it was my initiation into the entire process of serving small congregations without rabbis.

They sent me to West Point, Georgia.

West Point, Georgia is a small town, whose main industry, at that time, was the manufacture of towels and other linens. The Jewish community was small in number, smaller than it had been when Jewish peddlers settled there at the beginning of the Twentieth century.

My anxiety level was very high. But it was tempered by the fact that this was the first time I had ever been south of the Mason-Dixon line. I was excited to visit the American South.

What I found was eye-opening in many ways. But the most significant memory is that of a visit to Warm Springs, Georgia, where President Roosevelt used to vacation to relieve the symptoms of polio. When my hosts let me out of their car, I encountered for the first time two separate water fountains, labeled WHITES only, and COLOREDS only. I had never seen anything like this in my life. This was my first exposure to segregation in a very real sense. While in college, as the editor of the student newspaper, I wrote editorials about Autherine Lucy trying to de-segregate the University of Alabama. But here, in front of me, was my first exposure to what segregation really means.

I. RACISM IS NOT ONLY IN THE SOUTH

While such blatant segregation is no longer allowed in this country, it is clear that racism still exists – not only in the South – but here in the North as well. The headlines of the last several months brought this reality home to us in very significant ways.

I think that all of us kind of suspected that profiling exists in the major cities of the North, especially among police departments. The evidence of prejudice among police in the north has occupied our attention far too often. You know the names of the African American men and women whose names occupied the headlines. Eric Garner on Staten Island, Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, Sandra Blanche in Texas.

On the Fourth of July this year, we were invited to a cook-out at the home of our machatonim in Rockland County. One of the

other guests who is African American, related to us “What every young black man must learn!” When approached by a policeman for a traffic violation, put up your hands immediately. Do not argue. Be polite in the extreme. The woman’s husband, who was not present, has a very dark complexion. He is regularly stopped by police, because he drives a luxury car. Once he shows his credentials that he is an employee of the State of New Jersey who holds a significant position in the State in the social work system, the police suddenly change their stance.

But racism exists everywhere. A good friend of ours is Indian. She was born here; her complexion is quite dark. She doesn’t look African American. She looks Indian. She relates to us the number of occasions when she and her WASP husband were seated at the back of restaurants, near the kitchen. Was this to hide them? Or to discourage their return to the establishment?

Did it matter that she was a lawyer and Rhodes scholar, who met her husband at Oxford?

Were we really surprised that police departments in this country profile African American men and women? Are we really surprised that the rules are different for people who are not white?

For those of us who fought hard in the 50's and 60's for civil rights, it is hard to believe that the battle is not over.

II. JEWISH INVOLVEMENT IN CIVIL RIGHTS

Our Jewish commitment to the civil rights movement has always been deep and wide. In the 1950's, we were visibly present in every significant civil rights rally.

As early as the 19th century, American Jews tried to end the notion of White supremacy. Jewish Julius Rosenwald, the chairman of Sears Roebuck, was a leader in contributing to agencies that supported Southern Blacks. Jews were among the founders and earliest supporters of the NAACP. In 1914, Professor Joel Springarn of Columbia University, was the chairman of the NAACP and he recruited Jewish leaders like Jacob Schiff and Rabbi Stephen Wise to his board. Jews were the earliest supporters of the Urban League, which was created to help Black migrants to the North.

Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation league filed amicus curiae briefs in behalf of the anti-segregation cause. The American Jewish Committee sponsored the famous study by Dr. Kenneth Clark of the American education system that led to the Brown v. Board of Education decision in the Supreme Court.

Yes, synagogues were attacked in the South. That did not stop large numbers of rabbis from speaking out and acting against the cause of segregation. Rabbi Julian Feibelman of Temple Sinai in New Orleans invited black Ralph Bunch to speak. It was 1949. It was the first non-segregated audience in the South.

Two Jewish boys from New York, Michael Schwermer and Andrew Goodman were killed in Mississippi in 1964 by Klansmen while helping to register black voters.

Our commitment to civil rights is on the record. We were for integration and Black rights from the beginning. And yet, our attention seems to have wandered to other issues on our Jewish agenda.

III. OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS JEWS

Therefore, on this Yom Kippur Day, I call upon us all to return to fighting against segregation. The battle in which we played such a significant role has not ended. There is much to be done, in every sphere of American life.

Throughout the country, there are efforts to keep the poor and immigrants off the voting rolls. Perhaps legislatures in the South want to keep the downtrodden out of the election booths because they might vote for Democrats rather than Republicans. But the Republican party cannot long identify itself with as the party of denial of Black rights in order to win elections.

We need to throw our support to the NAACP and other African American organizations to fight for Southern Black voting rights, as we did in 1960's.

But the fight for the full integration of Blacks in American life is also about what happens in our cities in the North. We must condemn every effort that seeks to penalize Blacks merely because they are Black. This spans the gamut from school districting that offers minimal opportunities to Blacks and other minorities to integration of our police departments.

We must rid ourselves of the fear of Black adolescents, who behave like the adolescents they are. We must fight to introduce gun controls, so that the Dylann Roofs of the world can not access the guns to kill innocent people. The NRA is right. Guns don't kill people; people kill people. Cars don't kill people; drivers do. But not anyone can drive a car. We need licenses, granted only after driving tests.

Choose the area in which you would like to become active. I have no special formula. But each one of us needs to step up to the plate and do our part to truly end discrimination.

CONCLUSION

Injustice is everywhere around us. Each one of us harbors base feelings. Societal norms may cause us to refrain from speaking them, but they are there deep within us.

On Yom Kippur, we are asked to choose. Jewish teachings do not allow us the luxury of not doing anything. But by sitting on our hands, we essentially allow the evil that abounds in the world to win.

So, on this Yom Kippur we are reminded of our Jewish obligation to act. To act against the forces of evil. To act against the forces of evil in this world. We need to remember the traditions that have kept us alive. Or the traditions of justice and humanity that stand at the heart of what it means to be a Jew.

So Choose! Choose the good, and we shall live.

Ken Yehi ratzon.