

## **What I Learned About Race**

*Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur 5776/2015*

On the evening of June 17 a young man entered the historic Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina. He took part in the regular Wednesday evening Bible study group. He was welcomed as a friend. He was given a place of honor next to the pastor. We all know what happened next, though it is still hard to comprehend. The news brought shock and despair. It was a horrifying and overtly racist hate crime.

On the very same evening, at the very same hour, my wife Haley and I, along with Cantor Sklar and about a half-dozen other members of our congregation entered another African Methodist Episcopal church, Bethel AME in Bridgeport. We were there because Temple Israel is a proud partner in CONECT, which stands for Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut. CONECT is an alliance of about 30 congregations across Fairfield and New Haven Counties. It includes mostly churches and a few synagogues; there are congregations in urban neighborhoods and suburban neighborhoods; there are congregations that are mostly white, others are largely black, and some are Latino.

We gathered at Bethel AME that June evening to talk about community policing. A couple hundred people filled the church. The mayor, the chief of police and many of the top police brass sat on the dais along with Rev. Bernadette Hickman-Maynard. She and her husband Teddy serve as co-pastors leading Bethel AME. The community dialogue that night was respectful but it had a clear purpose. One by one, members of CONECT congregations stepped forward to tell painful stories of their interactions with the Bridgeport police, and to ask pointed questions of the city leaders.

I speak about CONECT not to congratulate us for being “progressive” or for “doing good.” We are part of CONECT because we recognize that we are all in this together – all of us. In addition to community policing CONECT is addressing the cost of healthcare, gun violence and immigrant rights.

I would love you all to become part of CONECT. It’s a concrete, inspiring, challenging opportunity to get to know our neighbors across the religious and ethnic spectrum. I invite you to join us in seeking common solutions to our common challenges.

Community policing matters to all of us. Over the past year-plus we have witnessed the death of unarmed young black adults at the hands of police in Staten Island, Ferguson, Baltimore, North Charleston, Texas, Ohio and elsewhere. Certainly these deaths fall into a different category from those in Charleston. They are not part of a racist campaign for white supremacy. Moreover, I am not a police officer. I can only imagine the dangers our brave officers face on a daily basis. But in certain situations, the use of force has been excessive. The trend should concern us all.

In witnessing these incidents, and through my participation in CONECT, I have learned something important this year. I thought I understood the issue of race in America. Part of me was idealistic enough to believe that because we had twice elected a black president, certain boundaries had been overcome. But I was naïve. I didn't have a clue.

Given the events of this year, I now understand inequality in our country in a way that I never did before. I think many of us do. No longer can we claim that we don't know what goes on. No longer can we pretend to be ignorant of the way minorities are treated by some police officers. In certain quarters, the respect and value given to black lives simply doesn't match that given to white lives.

No longer can we hide from the disproportionate effects of our criminal justice system on minorities. Rates of arrest, indictment, and conviction are far higher, and sentences far harsher for minorities.

No longer can we deny that our incarceration system wreaks untold damage on minority communities. Our prisons are filled with young black men who, even if they get out, often find themselves under-educated and unemployable.

Simply put, there are structures of racism in our society. We benefit from them, often unwittingly. Others suffer under them. That is simply wrong. And I know it's not the society any of us want to live in.

I am aware that this is among the most difficult issues we can talk about. But on these most important of days, we have no choice.

I don't think that there is a single person in our congregation who is racist. If a black family bought the house next door, I believe that any of us would welcome them without reservation. At the same time, I also firmly believe in the message of our prophets as summarized by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself... In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."<sup>1</sup>

We are all complicit in the structures of institutional racism that plague our nation. And therefore we are all responsible.

Today I want to make a confession of my own. Moving to Connecticut has made me uncomfortable when it comes to the issue of race. When I lived in Manhattan I saw people of all skin colors and ethnic backgrounds all the time. On the sidewalks, the subways and buses, one encounters the entire vast range of humanity. Those of you who commute to the city are

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement" (1972); later included in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (1996).

part of that diversity every day. It's one of the characteristics that makes New York City such an interesting and vibrant place. And I was proud to be part of it.

Now we live here. Westport's population is 93% white, and Weston's population is 96% white. I have noticed that my mindset, thoughts, and assumptions have changed. A few months after we moved to Connecticut I surprised myself with my own thoughts. I noticed a person of color walking through a residential neighborhood. I asked myself, "Does he belong here? I wonder what he is doing here." I would guess that I'm not the only person in this sanctuary who has had those thoughts.

And yet I was appalled at the assumption I had made – that a person did not belong in a certain neighborhood because of the color of their skin. Did I become racist all of a sudden? I certainly hope not. But the context in which I exist has changed.

All of us who live here know that we have chosen to live in a bubble. I'm not condemning this bubble. We have a very nice quality of life. Haley and I could not be happier here. But we all recognize that there are ramifications to the choice we have made.

From time to time, as I speak with parents in our congregation I ask them about their most important concerns for their children. They often speak of the unintended effects of living in this bubble. We know that we are incredibly fortunate to be able to raise our kids in an environment of abundance. We are thankful that many of us are able to give our children whatever they might need to succeed.

Most importantly, we want to give our children the things money can't buy. We want to teach our children empathy. We want them to understand the feelings of others who are different from them.

We want to teach our children compassion. We want them to see that not everybody grows up in a place like this, with lovely homes, healthy restaurants, good schools, and opportunities galore. We want them to know that there are people who live nearby whose lives are very different from ours.

We want to teach our children humanity. We want them to connect to a diversity of experience and opinion and outlook. We know that doing so will add richness and depth and wisdom to their lives. It will make them more human.

Throughout our history we Jews were the ones who were different, of course. We were the outsiders within the dominant culture. Dozens of times the Torah reminds us that we know what it felt like to be the stranger, for we were treated as strangers in the land of Egypt.

Meanwhile today, here in the United States, we don't feel like a minority. We aren't treated as second-class. That is certainly because of our attainment of educational and professional success, but it's also a result of America's growing acceptance of difference.

And yet, most Jews don't choose to wear their difference visibly. We don't wear black hats or fringes. We can blend in if we choose to. One of the reasons I wear a kippah is that I *want* to stand out. I don't want to blend into the rest of white America. I want to declare that as a Jew I have a different history, a different perspective, a different set of values. Part of my obligation as a Jew is to ensure that just as my family has been able to succeed in this country, so too other families can succeed as well.

Especially given our history, we have a responsibility to learn what it feels like to be a minority in this country today. That's an ironic thing for me to say – that we need to learn what it feels like to be a minority. But it is also important to note that the Jewish community is changing, rapidly. We can no longer assume that we know what a Jewish person will look like. On occasion I've been told I look Irish. Now, looking Irish doesn't quite count for racial diversity, but it does speak to the assumptions that we bring to the table. Day by day the racial diversity of the Jewish community is growing, and that is a good thing. Every single person who joins our community – each child born or adopted, each spouse brought into a family, each person who chooses to become Jewish – adds vitality and creativity to our community. They will be an integral part of writing the next chapter in the story of our people.

Reverend Anthony Bennett of Mt Aery Baptist, also a CONECT congregation in Bridgeport, spoke on this bima in January. His passionate call for black and white, Christian and Jew to work together was inspiring. It was also eerily similar to the sermon Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr delivered on this bima back in 1964. Fifty-one years, and we're still having the same conversation!

The conversation will change when we care for young black and Hispanic kids as we care for our own. We react with shock when we learn that an 18 year-old was shot in a white neighborhood. But we are too often indifferent to the news of the shooting of an 18 year-old kid in a black neighborhood.

The conversation will change when we make ourselves a part of it. We talk about beginning dialogue across racial and ethnic boundaries but we often don't know where to begin. For us, CONECT is the answer. But let's be clear: the purpose of dialogue is not self-congratulation. Dialogue is a way to start working with others – and it is *real* work, *real* listening, *real* candor, which leads to *real* collaboration. That is the only way we can make real change on the issues that strain our nation.

The conversation will change when we enable our children to get to know children from other neighborhoods – in a way that benefits ALL involved. Some of our parents and teachers are coming together to work on ways that Temple Israel can build bridges with other ethnic and religious communities nearby. I'd love for you to be a part of that too.

Here at Temple Israel we are fortunate to have a very productive relationship with the Westport Police Department. We trust them. Any time we have needed them, they have been

here for us. The department serves our community very well. I want us to work with our friends in the department to make sure that a Ferguson, or a Baltimore, or a Staten Island will never occur here.

I know this a congregation of empathy, compassion and humanity.

Empathy requires understanding the lives others live. Empathy calls us to really listen to their stories, their daily struggles, the concerns they have for their children.

For us, compassion means that we acknowledge the struggles of others. I will never know what it's like to be followed by store employees as I browse the aisles, or to be pulled over for no particular reason. But I acknowledge that these patterns are real, and painful.

Living our full humanity requires that we help create the conditions in which others can lift themselves up. Living our full humanity means recognizing that we have been given a great gift. But appreciating our good fortune is not enough – now we have to do something with it.

I believe that we, here at Temple Israel, can build the nation that we most want to live in – a nation that lives up to its founding principles of liberty and equality. The work begins today. Let's not waste a moment.

*Ken yehi ratzon* – may it be so.