

“California Dreamin’”

The Internet is an amazing thing! With very little effort, I found a color photo of my great grandparents' combined granite tombstone that stands rather impressively in a Bay Area cemetery. Then, with a few more clicks of the mouse, I located a census record that said my great grandmother was actually born in San Francisco in 1867. She later married my great grandfather, who was a San Francisco cap maker. They gave birth to my grandfather, who graduated into the *shmatteh* business – a garment manufacturer – who then had my father, the first to go to college and get an engineering degree, who married my mother and had me, who became a rabbi, like their ancestors of old in Europe.

OK, so you can't win 'em all – not every generation is a step forward!

The point is, that being a native Californian is a special heritage in my family. From San Francisco, my father's family moved down to Los Angeles in the 1930's, where I was eventually born, and then Davida and I moved down the coast further to San Diego, where our children have grown up. During WWI, my grandmother served in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. During WWII, my father served in the South Pacific in the U.S. Navy. I was raised with a deep appreciation of our beautiful state and a love of our country – in every respect, an American and California Jew.

Of course, my generation expressed our civic commitment much differently than did our parents. We were on the vanguard of the protest movement of the 1960's and 70's. Being a leader in NFTY So. Cal (our Reform youth division), meant we marched and petitioned for civil rights, for public education in a confused era of forced bussing and white flight, for environmental protection at a time when we were just beginning to understand what that brown stuff was in the sky. But our love of state and country was no less deeply felt by us than it was by our parents and grandparents. It's ultimately what inspired me to become a rabbi – the passion to bring about positive social change in our country.

When you think about it, the Jewish American story is really the stuff of which fairytales are made. At the turn of the 20th century, we came to America with nothing but dreams of the Goldene Medina – the almost foolish illusion that the streets were paved with gold. We then encountered the harsh realities of pushcarts and sweatshops, of multiple families packed into tiny rooms in tenement houses. We survived by simple trades, like tailoring and cap making. We scrimped and saved enough to open our own small storefronts and then even our own factories. We eventually moved out to the suburbs and sent our kids off

to college so they wouldn't have to struggle like their parents did, and then we were born, you and I – American Jews, poised to live the American dream.

In half a century, we broke through almost every barrier, every restriction, every glass ceiling. We are no longer barred from living in covenanted communities like La Jolla or Rancho Santa Fe, as we were just a generation ago. We are no longer rejected from universities because we are Jewish. We no longer have to form Jewish country clubs because the gentile clubs kept Jews out.

And as we take just a moment to marvel at this achievement, we also have to ask ourselves, how did it all happen? How did we end up in the highest echelons of academia, of business, of the arts, of government and politics? What led to this shattering of all barriers and surge of Jews to the top?

I think it has something to do with the fact that we've proven ourselves worthy of the acceptance accorded us. And here I don't mean worthy because others see us as smart, or hard working, or innovative. I mean worthy because there is something even greater to which we aspire as American Jews and in our Jewish institutions. We aspire to be ethical; we aspire to be compassionate; we aspire to be just and to work for justice. We are not only successful in America, but we are invested in America's success.

As we look back on our amazing journey to acceptance in America, we would do well to reflect on this fact. Not only did America give something to us, but we have given something to America – we were instrumental in the formation of the labor movement of the early 20th century, fighting for the abolition of sweatshops and organizing for workers rights. And in the later 20th century, our greatest rabbis and leaders fought tirelessly in the civil rights movement.

In fact, this Rosh Hashanah marks the 50th anniversary of two of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation ever passed in this country – the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – both of which were championed fearlessly by our rabbis and Jewish leaders.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed at a time when our country was in tremendous upheaval over segregation. Some of us are old enough to remember what segregation looked like – separate schools, separate seating in restaurants and on buses, separate bathrooms and even drinking fountains, and by the way, an occasional sign that said, "No Jews Allowed." Jim Crow laws oppressed African Americans throughout the South, but these laws were protected as a matter of "states' rights," with which our Federal government allegedly couldn't interfere.

So, we marched. Our rabbis and synagogue leaders marched in the South with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., where some were beaten and even jailed. In fact, in 1964, 15 Reform Rabbis were arrested and jailed with Dr. King in St. Augustine, Florida, for the crime of holding a racially mixed prayer rally in front of a segregated restaurant. And two more of our rabbis were arrested for sitting at the same restaurant table with three young African Americans.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of our most outspoken Conservative rabbis, was a close friend and ally of Dr. King, and someone who clearly saw his activism as a religious imperative. After marching in Selma, Alabama with Dr. King, Rabbi Heschel wrote that he felt as though his legs were praying. And as a result of that historic march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson submitted legislation to Congress, and the Voting Rights Act was passed, removing the barriers that had kept African Americans from voting in this country.

And here is something of which we can be really proud. Both the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, were drafted in the conference room of our Union for Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center, in Washington, D.C.

This is our legacy. These are the shoulders on which we Reform Jews are standing. 50 years ago, our bold lay leaders and rabbis were on the vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement. Before that, on the vanguard of the Labor Movement. And since then, on the forefront of Women's Rights and Marriage Equality. When our story is told, it will record that we are not only successful in America, but we are invested in America's success – in creating a more just, a more ethical, and compassionate society.

So, where to next? As we cast our glance outward from this this pinnacle of Jewish achievement, from perhaps the most successful and engaged moment in all of Jewish history, what do we do now? What is the next great cause that we American Reform Jews are mobilizing behind?

As it turns out, there's not a lot of there, there. In the last twenty or so years, the needle of our social justice meter has hovered between sporadic and apathetic. We have been lulled into to what Robert Putnam calls, the "Bowling Alone" syndrome, in which, nationwide, American participation in everything from bowling leagues, to civic groups, to politics has dropped precipitously. Americans today sign 30 percent fewer petitions; we are 40 percent less likely to support a consumer boycott; our membership in social clubs, religious & civic organizations has decline on average by 60 percent! And we American Jews are right there, following this downward trend of belonging and civic engagement.

So, here we are. Standing on the shoulders of greatness, marking the 50 year anniversary of our supreme achievement in civic engagement, and this can't be the end of our story – there has to be another chapter for you and me to write.

We simply cannot say that we rose up from tenements, and push carts, and labor organizing, and the civil rights struggle, and then did nothing more. “*Lo aleycha hamelacha ligmor v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimena* – you are not required to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it!”

So what can we do? Assuming that you are passionate about making a difference in our community, and I believe you are, there is something we can do. And that is, to start dreaming – you might say, “California Dreamin’.” Whether native or not, we are all Californians now – citizens of one of the most physically beautiful, socially aware, culturally exciting, technologically innovative states in the country!

And the question that we at Temple Solel have been asked to think about is, “what is the California of our dreams?” It's a question that Reform synagogues up and down our state are asking. Because we believe that we can have tremendous power if we join together as a coalition of Reform California dreamers.

And, by the way, we've already begun! Reform California was formed last year and, in that time, we've had a major impact on two successful pieces of state legislation, one to create immigration reform, and another to fund affordable housing.

But there is so much more we can do. What do you worry about for our state? The recession has left our basic infrastructure of highways, bridges, and parks with a tremendous amount of deferred maintenance. Our public schools have seen dramatically increased class sizes, and our librarians, school counselors, nurses, arts programs – all the things we used to take for granted – eliminated. Affordable housing is a huge issue for all of us, and especially for those who need to live within commuting distance of their middle and lower income jobs in our California cities, but are priced out of the housing market and are forced to commute hours each day – adding tons of smog to our already fragile atmosphere. And then there is gun violence – plaguing our schools and public spaces. While California has among the toughest gun regulations in the country, there is still more we can do to keep guns out of the hands of those with known mental illness and a proclivity to violence.

These are, every one of them, issues that keep many of us awake at night – our children's education, our environment, our personal safety, and affordable housing that insures our children can afford a future here! But these are not

problems without solutions – right now, there are bills both in, and on the way to our California legislature, that could make huge impacts in each of these critical areas.

It really is time for us to reverse the trend of Bowling Alone and reclaim our proud tradition of social activism. Reform California is picking up steam and reigniting the spark of social justice in Reform synagogues up and down our state.

I am proud to serve on the steering committee of Reform California, and to see it grow to encompass all of our voices. At this moment, we are poised to choose our next campaign, and we need your voice and your ideas. What is your big issue? What for you would create the California of your dreams? If Temple Solel could join with all the other Reform congregations in our state, what would you personally want us to address?

Last March, I had the honor of representing Reform California at the annual gathering of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. I told my colleagues what we are doing as a statewide Reform community, and they were in awe. We are the first state within the Reform Movement to join together in statewide action. As usual, California is leading the way and others are watching.

So, how can you let your voice be heard? First, you can fill out the postcard you received on your way into our sanctuary tonight and get it back to me at any time in the next week or two. Check off the issues you would like to tackle with us, and add any others that you think should be on the radar.

Second, join with me Marla Strich, Linda Friedman, Elaine Barton, and Eric Hall, our Solel Reform California Team Leaders, for an evening of conversation in the Sukkah. During Sukkot, Reform synagogues statewide will be hosting Sukkah house meetings like ours to chart our future direction. I personally want to hear from you and talk about your California dreams.

A number of months ago, I learned about a billionaire philanthropist by the name of David Rubenstein. What stands out about his charitable giving is that he has made it his personal mission to shore up institutions that are supposed to be funded by the government. He donated \$7 million to repair the Washington Monument. He gave \$75 million to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and \$7 million to the Smithsonian for the National Zoo. Almost two thirds of the \$300 million he has given away has been what he calls, “patriotic giving.” When asked what has made him one of the only philanthropists to underwrite our government, he answers very simply: he applies the “mother” standard to his giving. Many of his business achievements go unrecognized by his mom, but when he makes these kinds of donations, she always calls and says, “I’m proud.”

I would like to think that we can be equally patriotic in our own ways, and make the generations who came before us proud. America has given us such remarkable gifts and opportunities. For all of us here, California has opened doors to a wonderful life. Our parents and grandparents and great grandparents felt blessed to live here, and they gave back in untold ways to defend our liberties, to extend civil rights, and to pay forward a future for us and our children. Now, it's our turn to be patriotic, and open up the California dream for others.

As we join for this first service of our New Year, and make our resolutions to live a better life, let the sound of the shofar awaken our patriotism. It's time to stop bowling alone. Our immigrant ancestors gave us power and a voice, and they showed us how to use them for social good.

Reform California presents that possibility again, and it's time for us to speak!