

“B’Yachad, In This Together: The Challenge of Race in America”

This summer, I fulfilled a longtime ambition. After ten days of study at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Davida and I hopped a short flight to Eastern Europe to take in, for the first time, the places and the history of the Holocaust. While on the train from Budapest to Prague, I looked out the window and suddenly noticed the narrow gauge tracks that were running right next to us, what looked to be the remains of a 20th century rail system. I thought to myself, these could be the very tracks over which the Nazis ran their cattle cars filled with Jews.

As we passed mainly through tiny villages and occasional actual towns like Bratislava and Byrno, I began to get a picture of what the Nazi did. Six million is a big number – a number that conveys unimaginable tragedy. But broken down to scattered villages and towns and a railroad line, it becomes imaginable.

Literally, combing the countryside, the S.S. went door to door, interviewing residents and demanding to know where the Jews lived. Street by street, village by village, town by distant town, all across Europe, Jews were identified, taken from their homes, herded onto trains and run to ghettos like the ones I visited in Budapest and Prague and Terezin, and from there, eventually, to the concentration camps. Those Jews lucky enough to not be sent directly to the camps were required to wear the infamous yellow star – a public badge of their inferior race and status.

One could argue that this was the largest scale operation of institutionalized racism ever mounted – racial profiling at its absolute most deadly and extreme. And it happened to us – the Jews. We are history’s living testimony and witness to the extreme racism of which humanity is capable.

But we are not the only example, and Europe is not the only perpetrator. During WWII, right here in the United States, we rounded up and interned over 100,000 Japanese Americans, more than 2/3’s of whom were U.S. citizens. Clearly, our country was at war and some degree of irrational paranoia was taking over. But these were American citizens who were denied due process, taken from their homes and businesses, and interned for their race. Next time you drive up toward Mammoth Lakes, just stop at the Manzanar War Relocation Center, now a National Historic Site – and you can see exactly what one of the ten camps across America looked like, and the story of our mistreatment of Japanese Americans during the War.

However, even this pales in comparison with the institution of slavery in America. It is impossible for me, a native Californian, to fathom a country and an economy and a way of life that was built on the foundation of enslavement and exploitation. And yet, we did it. We imported and sold human beings into servitude and suffering. And after the Civil War, even though we freed the slaves, we instituted Jim Crow laws that segregated our public spaces, our workplaces and schools, our neighborhoods, and our hearts.

I clearly remember seeing white only bathrooms and drinking fountains. I remember segregated restaurants and movie theaters. I remember forced bussing in Los Angeles city schools as a feeble attempt to do something about segregation and deprived inner city schools.

And where are we today? We have an African American president. That's certainly progress. The Confederate Flag came down just this summer from the South Carolina Statehouse – the last public symbol of institutional racism is finally headed for a museum. That is progress, too.

But, here is a sobering fact. In a Pew Research Poll that came out last month, one half of Americans agreed that racism in the U.S. is a “big problem.” This is not only significant, but it's double the number of those who felt that way in 2009, when President Obama was inaugurated as our first African American president.

Houston, we still have a problem! Things are not getting better, they're getting worse.

The shooting of an unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, whether justified or not, threw kerosene on the smoldering fire of discontent among African Americans in this Missouri town, and set off waves of protests across America. Freddie Gray, who died in the back of police van, touched off rioting in Baltimore and has led to the indictment of six police officers. Then there was Sandra Bland in Texas, who was pulled over for allegedly failing to signal while changing lanes. And when she refused to get out of her car, as the officer demanded for not extinguishing her cigarette, he pointed a Taser gun at her and yelled, “I will light you up.” Three days later, Bland was dead in her jail cell of an apparent suicide. Finally, there was the case of Eric Garner of Staten Island, who was choked to death by police officers in an arrest for selling loose cigarettes on a street corner.

Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, all in roughly the last year. Not to mention the horrific racially driven massacre of Rev. Pinckney and eight others at AME Episcopal Church in Charleston. Our cities are simmering with unrest and, whether we realize it or not, anything could cause the lid to blow off. Yes, racism in America is indeed a big problem and only growing worse this past year.

I want to first say that we cannot lay all of this at the doorstep of law enforcement. The majority of peace officers in this country are exercising tremendous restraint and working in countless ways to build relationships within the communities they serve. We owe law enforcement our strongest support and deepest debt of gratitude for keeping us safe and protecting us from crime. Every day, peace officers go out there and put their lives on the line for you and me. My first cousin, Shawn, is a sergeant in the L.A. Sheriff's Department, and I have heard personal stories about the kinds of violent situations an officer can face at any moment. But, an officer of the law is also an imperfect human being who can step *over* the line of duty. And these high-profile cases have shown us what can happen when things go wrong.

We already know we have a problem with race in this country – 50% of Americans are in agreement – and that problem has clearly been inflamed by recent law enforcement encounters that involved race. If we don't do more to address it, our cities will eventually rise up in turmoil.

As Jews, we are living witnesses to history. Our experience in the Holocaust has made us the bearers of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's powerful lesson, that "Some are guilty, all are responsible."

But what can we do about this? Isn't this just too big a problem for us to tackle?

Well, one amazing thing our Reform Movement did this summer was join the NAACP on America's Journey for Justice—an historic 860-mile march from Selma, Alabama, to Washington, D.C., rekindling the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King's March on Washington in 1963. And just as a number of rabbis and Jewish leaders did back then, this summer, Reform rabbis and congregations carrying Torah scrolls joined to each walk a segment of the march, and made the statement that we all stand together – that we Reform Jews are still passionate about civil rights, voting rights, equal access to quality education, and a fair criminal justice system.

As this more than month long march culminates in Washington D.C. tomorrow, we can also ask what we can do locally in California to effect change. You have heard me talk about Reform California before. Reform synagogues up and down the state have created a coalition to advocate for causes that matter to us. We have successfully lobbied for immigration reform and The California Trust Act. We have joined together to see a housing bill passed for more low-income housing closer to where people work.

And, in the process, Reform California has grown tremendously in stature and reach. We are now officially an arm of the Reform Movement and the URJ, our

National Union for Reform Judaism, has this year provided us with two outstanding senior staffers – one in Northern and another in Southern California.

We are the only statewide organization of its kind within the Reform Movement and, as we would hope, we're setting the pace for Reform Judaism nationwide. The rest of the country is watching us – rabbis and reform synagogues in other states are paying close attention to the actions we take. And we are poised.

Our new campaign is called, "B'Yachad, In This Together." The campaign was given this name because we are critically aware that we're part of an ethnically diverse California community who share common goals and a common welfare. We are law enforcement and citizens, Caucasians, African Americans, Latinos, Jews, Asians – you name it. Whatever we are, we are in this together, where the welfare of all depends on the welfare of each and every one of us.

Reform California, is committed to the ideal that that every citizen, irrespective of race, should be treated fairly and equally. To this end, Reform California is campaigning for a very important bill on racial profiling that has now passed both the State Assembly and Senate, and is on its way to Governor Brown's desk for signature. This bill has not only the support of the State Legislature, but the majority of California voters, and even of the Editorial Board of the Los Angeles Times. But, we're not at all sure that Governor Brown will sign it. We've been told that, as of this moment, he's 50/50. He needs to hear from us.

Right now, eighteen states are requiring data collection for stops and searches, to see where there is a bias for racial profiling. But surprisingly California's laws are not that stringent, at least not yet. AB 953, was introduced by San Diego Assemblywoman Shirley Weber, and it does a few important things. First, it clarifies the definition of racial and identity profiling, and it makes reporting of racial statistics on law enforcement stops mandatory (which it currently is not). And second, it establishes a statewide advisory board, whose job will be to review the data from around the state, and work to improve racial sensitivity in law enforcement departments where it's needed.

As you entered our Sanctuary this morning, you received an action card from Reform California. This is our chance to keep what happened in Ferguson, or Staten Island, or Baltimore from happening here in California.

I have to tell you that, when our Reform California representatives sit at the table with our other coalition partners, these diverse ethnic partners wonder what the heck we Jews are doing there. Why do you care about issues that rarely touch your Jewish community, they ask us? Our answer is easy. We were slaves in Egypt. We know the heart of the stranger, the Torah teaches us. We wore the yellow star, we rode the cattle cars, we were victims of racism. We are with you

because we are one generation away from not only extermination, but exclusion from American universities, from the upper echelons of businesses & professions, from membership in country clubs, from buying homes in the covenanted communities of Rancho Santa Fe and La Jolla because of our identity. We hear your cry because it was our cry – some are guilty, all are responsible.

As the tragic news of the past year has made clear, race is still a crisis in America – and 50% of Americans agree that the work of the Civil Rights Movement is not over. As Californians and as Reform Jews, we have a chance to make a difference in the coming days. We are B'Yachad – in this together. It's crucial that we do everything in our power to improve the climate of race in America.

In the Talmud it is said: "Whoever can influence the members of his household to stop sinning, but does not, is punished for sins of his household. If he can influence the people of his city, but does not, he is punished for the sins of his city. If he can stop the whole world from sinning, and does not, he is punished for the sins of the whole world."

I hope you'll join me and the rest of Reform California as, at this inspiring season of the New Year, we heed the Shofar's call to bring peace & justice to the world.

Some are guilty, but all are responsible. Shana Tova