

One of the absolute highlights of last year for me was standing at the MLK Memorial in Washington DC, with Rabbi Jordana and 12 of our Temple teens. The new memorial is built on the banks of the National Mall's tidal basin, opposite the Jefferson Memorial. As we walked toward the huge carved monument of Dr. King, the wall on our side grew higher and higher, symbolizing the mountain that he and the Civil Rights Movement had ascended to bring us to a higher ground as a country, to stand at a place where we could begin to see past the color of a person's skin to recognize our common humanity. Engraved on the sides of that mountain were words from Scripture, from the prophet Amos (5:24): *Let justice well up like waters, righteousness as a mighty stream* and words from Dr. King himself: *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.* (16 April 1963, Birmingham, AL). The black granite seemed to be a reminder of how dark and perilous the struggle had been to overcome a mountain of racism in our

society. And then... there he was carved in white granite, Dr. King, emerging from the center of the mountain, but in front of the entire mountain, having moved the mountain of racism, the embodiment of his words to *"hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."* Inspirational, humbling, powerful...the memorial's artist had turned color inside out; the mountain of prejudice by white America was carved in black, and the African American minister who broke the stronghold of racism was carved in white, the color of purity. I didn't stand on the National Mall 50 years ago, when Dr. King spoke to a quarter of a million people- black and white-of his dream of ascending the mountain, but 50 years later, I am still moved to tears by the man and the message.

And I am moved deeply by the truth that Dr. King's message of Justice and Righteousness was rooted in *our* Testament- Holy Scriptures, *our* Torah, *our* prophets. In one of the most powerful passages of Torah, God appears before Abraham, to share this "Divine anguish" with Abraham about how corrupt humankind has

become. God says, in so many words: “The people of Sodom and Gomorrah are exploiting each other, hurting and abusing each other. They have no regard for the character and quality of their society. I am planning to destroy them because this is not what I wanted from humankind.” And God tells us what it is about Abraham that inspires God to want to share this anguish about humankind. Abraham understands he is to be a blessing to all peoples- not just his own race and nation. And Abraham understands he is to teach his children about justice and righteousness, tzedek and mishpat. It has been our people’s unique heritage since Abraham that this is a message we have continued to put before the world for 3,500 years, a message that at times kings, rulers, generals and strongmen have sought to stifle: society must be built on a foundation of justice and righteousness. Law *does not* always equal justice; societal norms *do not* always equal righteous behavior. No less in this country than in other countries have we advocated for a society free from racism, not only because we have been hurt by racism against *our* people,

which we call anti-Semitism, but because we believe in the words which torah has imprinted on our souls- do not oppress the stranger, the one who is not like you who lives among you; do not hate another in your heart; let justice well up like waters, righteousness like a mighty stream. Tzedek Tzedek tirdof- Justice, justice shall you pursue with all diligence, for it is elusive, and often outside of one's grasp.

50 years after the Civil Rights March on Washington, I wonder, can we be a color-blind nation? Can we move beyond racism? Racism still lives in our society- in different, and more nuanced, and less black-and-white ways, than a generation ago. In recent months, legal decisions from the Supreme Court abolishing key provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and in Florida, the George Zimmerman- Trayvon Martin murder trial have opened again more public discourse on how to identify, label and respond to racism, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Can we look at society, can we look at ourselves and our communities and identify how racism still lives

in our society? There is no question about the changes we see in America since MLK's day, and that change has come from both external force- such as law, and internal forces- such as the change of the human heart. In 1967, the Supreme Court legalized inter-racial marriage in the last of 16 United States. Today, 1 in 7 marriages in our country are inter-racial. In 50 years, our crayon box has changed from black, and white, red and brown, to a much more colorful palate today as immigration, adoption, and global diversity have made interracial couples and families commonplace and accepted. The classic images of racism that we once knew- the pictures of white lynch mobs terrorizing black men in the American South- are, please God, relegated to the past. But that doesn't mean that racism is completely vanquished; it may mean that it exists in less recognizable forms today.

It makes me think about words I heard a few weeks ago from Israel's Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, a well-regarded historian. He spoke of how racists- or in our case, anti-

Semites- had changed the tactic of how one de-legitimizes another, moving from physical attacks, to more subtle and sophisticated forms of undermining, by invoking politically-accepted values. In Israel's case, he spoke of the first stage of anti-Israel behavior as the many wars from 1948 through the Yom Kippur War-- 40 years ago today- physical attacks, which tried to destroy the country. The second stage began after 1973, when Israel's enemies realized they couldn't eradicate the Jewish state, so they turned to terrorism, a tactic employed for the next 3 decades. The third stage of attack is the current approach of the last two decades of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction; to destroy Israel by discrediting her behavior and reputation in the world through politically-approved methods of boycotting, divesting and sanctioning, to cripple her economy. Oren's formula is applicable to the issue of racism in our own country today. Gone are the days of physical attacks, slavery, Jim Crow laws and being counted as 3/5 of a human being in the national census. A second stage of attack on equality for people of

color was expressed through discrimination in housing, education and employment. Hard-fought battles in courthouses and in legislative halls have succeeded in bringing a legal equality. But racism isn't gone. The discussion of racism in our country today is often conducted under the guise of justice; are quotas good for people of color, or are they a detriment to their advancement, and are quotas discriminatory to whites? Are the voting rights laws of 1967 an unfair burden on certain counties, or are there racial motives behind their abolishment? How do we determine if and when these questions are just, and when these questions belie a darker agenda? In her dissent with the Supreme Court in striking down parts of the Voting Rights Act, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's words seem to echo Ambassador Oren's insight, that sometimes those with unjust agendas change tactics by claiming new ground. She observed that, "The focus of the Voting Rights Act had properly changed from 'first-generation barriers to ballot access' to 'second-generation barriers' like racial gerrymandering and

laws requiring at-large voting in places with a sizable black minority. Voting discrimination has morphed just as racial prejudice has taken new forms, she said. What had been "Jim Crow" racism has become structural racism." How do we, as people committed to justice, stay diligent in our pursuit of tzedek? How do we fight covert racism, now that blatant racism is illegal?

Through Ambassador Oren's words and Justice Ginsberg's words, I am reminded that those who wish to pervert what is right, and are not committed to a just society must be responded to with our loud and repetitive calls for justice. Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with Dr. King from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in March (21,) 1965 taught that this verse implies we are to do more than only follow or respect what is just; we must actively pursue it. And our tradition teaches that the word Tzedek- righteousness- is repeated in Deuteronomy- tzedek, tzedek- so we know that we can never rest on what is; we must be diligent to both act justly today, and to



bring about more justice tomorrow.

After 50 years, we have much to be proud of but we have work ahead, when we consider injustices to black men.

Notwithstanding the many real problems that exist in the African-American communities, I have to question whether justice is prevailing, when I hear that a black male born in 2001 has a 32% chance of spending some portion of his life in prison, while a white male born the same year has just a 6% chance. In major American cities, as many as 80% of young African-American men have criminal records. Black students are three and a half times as likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan who commissioned the study, said "The undeniable truth is that the everyday education experience for too many students of color *violates the principle of equity* at the heart of the American promise." We can take pride in our country's progress that a man of color can be elected a United States President; but when that man acknowledges the reality

that, by virtue of his color, it could have been him pulled over in a car to have a license checked, or stopped like Trayvon Martin for being in the wrong neighborhood, we must know that we are not at the top of the mountain looking out at the promised land, but that we are still on the challenging climb upward.

Dr. King spoke about the climb up the mountain to get to the Promised Land. The Jewish people, too, stood on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, looking into the promised land. The people are to turn and face each other while Moses pronounces the blessings they will find if they live righteously, and the consequences of choosing to live in disregard. It could have been the instinct of each tribe to say, "I'm standing with my own people, we'll take care of ourselves, and those other tribes standing over there, on that other mountain, they can take care of themselves." But God asks the people to stand face to face; to understand that what is good for one, is good for all, and what is bad for one is bad for all. And more- face to face means to look in our brother's eyes and see if they are suffering, or if they are

thriving. One cannot pretend to be blind when one is commanded to look. We cannot look in the eyes of members of our African American community, after this summer, and pretend that there is not still the pain of racism there, we cannot look in the eyes of our Latino neighbors in the struggle for immigration reform, and pretend that there is not racial degradation reflected there as well. We cannot pretend that people of color in our country are not stereotyped. We cannot turn our face from the people of Syria, in all the ugly, complexities of their religious, political and ethnic strife, and ignore the tangled imperative to strive toward justice and righteousness. We must find the courage to look in our own eyes and hearts, and see how we can make our society, and our world, more color-blind.

God comes to Abraham, because Abraham will be a blessing to all peoples. That is our legacy. We are to speak out when injustice affronts our people- to shine a light where anti-semitism might dwell. But if we are to truly be a blessing, we must be bold

enough to bring light to the dark corners where racism might continue to dwell in our society and our world. Dr. King taught, *“Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that.”* (1963, Strength to Love) Tzedek , tzedek, tirdof. Justice, justice, shall we pursue.

Ken yihiu ratzon. May that be our will.