

Rabbi Andrea London
Beth Emet The Free Synagogue
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*New World is Still A-Coming*¹

In the *dvar torah* that Rabbi David Polish delivered from this pulpit 50 years ago, he spoke about James Meredith's matriculation in the fall of 1962 as the first black student at the University of Mississippi and the importance of that event to the struggle for civil rights. Rabbi Polish spoke about how the other nations of the world would judge the United States based on the way we treat the black community. "...our role," he said, "and our integrity as a peace-loving peace-pursuing nation will be held in question until the stigma and the offense of Negro oppression will be lifted from the land...we will have to wrench ourselves loose from a world in which white America has too long been smug, arrogant, superior."

The year that had passed had been significant in the annals of Civil Rights' history. In addition to James Meredith integrating the University of Mississippi, Martin Luther King had written the Letter from a Birmingham Jail in April, 1963, and, just a few weeks before Rosh Hashanah, had delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech at the march on Washington. And only three days before Rosh Hashanah that year, 4 little girls were killed in a bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Rabbi Polish knew Martin Luther King. He had invited him to speak at Beth Emet in 1958 when the young preacher was becoming well-known for his role in the Montgomery bus boycott and for his leadership in the Montgomery Improvement Association. Two years after he delivered his Rosh Hashanah sermon in which he spoke about the importance of civil rights, Rabbi Polish, in 1965, would march with Martin Luther King in Selma to press for full voting rights for blacks.

Rabbi Polish challenged the Beth Emet community that Rosh Hashanah:
"Can we ever forget that we, literally some us here, that we, through our grandparents, aunts, and cousins; we, through our brother Jews, to the measure of six million—were the Negroes of Europe? Can we forget that twenty-five years ago come November, synagogues were burned in Germany while firemen and policemen stood by to make sure that neighboring German homes were not damaged? Why? Because we were Negroes. Can we forget that we were lined up in the streets of Berlin and Vienna to scrub the sidewalks while the "white folks" stood around to laugh at us, and kick us, to the amusement of their children?...I wonder whether we might have had a better fate if we had marched in the streets of Germany, the streets of Paris, the streets of New York and Chicago before it was too late to march anywhere except to our doom. So there is nothing more incongruous, nothing more obscene than for a Jew to be a racist."

¹ David Polish, "New World A-Coming: Rosh Hashanah, 1963," in *Abraham's Gamble: Selected Sermons for Our Time*.

The next two years would be critical in the fight for civil rights in our country during which two key pieces of legislation would ring the death knell of legalized racial discrimination. In 1964, the Civil Rights' Bill would be signed into law, outlawing major forms of discrimination against racial, ethnic, national and religious minorities, and women, and in 1965, Congress would pass the Voting Rights' act, ensuring equal access to voting for all US citizens regardless of race or education.

The story of racial inequality in our country, however, doesn't end here.

Today, black unemployment remains twice as high as among whites, just as it was 50 years ago. Income inequality is unchanged, too: Black households make just under 60% of white household income, the same as in 1963.

Poverty in the US has declined across the board, but the black poverty rate is still nearly triple the white rate.

Two years ago, I participated in a conversation about race with community leaders at Evanston Township High School, and I learned that black high school students—even after controlling for socioeconomic difference—achieve at a lower level than their white peers. Let me put this stark reality even more simply: Black teens who grow up in stable, comfortable, middle class households tend to perform less well academically than similarly situated white teens.

40% of those incarcerated in this country are black, and black neighborhoods have a much higher rate of violence than predominantly white neighborhoods. This is true in the city of Chicago, but also right here in Evanston.

“Some things have greatly improved. College enrollment among blacks, which was less than half the rate of whites in 1963 — 4% versus 10% — is now roughly equal at about 50% each (of high school graduates, that is). Black high school graduation rates are higher, too (62%, up from 25% in 1963), and closer to white rates (currently 80%, up from 50%).

No change is more dramatic than the number of black elected officials. There were about 500 nationwide in 1965, before the Voting Rights Act. Today there are about 10,500.

In broad terms, we might say black Americans have come a long way toward equality in civil rights—the rights guaranteed under the law — but they've hardly moved in economic equality.”²

Racism in the United States may no longer be *de jure*, but with statistics such as these can we claim with confidence that it has been eradicated? This summer the Supreme Court's undermining of the Voting Rights' Act and George Zimmerman's acquittal in the death

² J.J. Goldberg, *The Forward*, August 25, 2013.

of Trayvon Martin exposed the still raw wound of racial tension in our country. After the verdict, President Obama, in his most candid remarks about race, spoke about the racism that he has faced in his life. He talked about purses being clutched and car doors locked as he walked by. He acknowledged that racial profiling by the police has undermined their trust in the black community, making them less effective in reducing violence. And he spoke about the importance of people of different races engaging in dialogue with one another in order to gain greater understanding and empathy of what it's like to walk in a black person's shoes.³

And that's exactly what we have already begun here at Beth Emet—a conversation on race. Although all the issues that exist in the black community cannot be placed solely at the feet of the white community, my question tonight is, “What *IS* our responsibility in the face of persistent racial inequities in our society?”

Since racial discrimination is no longer legal in our country, how many of us have thought, if not said, that the problems the black community faces lie with the black community itself—that there's something inherent in black “culture” that prevents them from getting ahead—academically, economically? But on what basis do we make these judgments?

How many of us have had substantive and honest conversations with people in the black community about what it's like to be black in America today? We like to boast about the racial diversity of our community. But how many of us have interracial relationships beyond the most shallow, superficial level? This is why some have termed the diversity in our community “drive by diversity.” We may send our children to the same schools, frequent the same stores, sit in the same restaurants, even work together, but how well do we know what it's like to walk in a black person's shoes in America?

As President Obama challenged us, we need a real conversation on race in our country that allows us to develop relationships and understand one another better before we cast aspersions and affix blame. In his speech at the 50th anniversary commemoration of the March on Washington, the president made an allusion to Dr. King's own speech, saying, “The arc of the moral universe may bend towards justice, but it doesn't bend on its own. To secure the gains this country has made requires constant vigilance.”⁴

At Evanston Township High School, in response to the differences in educational achievement of black and white students, a dialogue on race called, “Courageous

³ President Barack Obama's speech July 19, 2013 “... I think it's going to be important for all of us to do some soul-searching. There has been talk about should we convene a conversation on race. I haven't seen that be particularly productive when politicians try to organize conversations. They end up being stilted and politicized, and folks are locked into the positions they already have. On the other hand, in families and churches and workplaces, there's the possibility that people are a little bit more honest, and at least you ask yourself your own questions about, am I wringing as much bias out of myself as I can? Am I judging people as much as I can, based on not the color of their skin, but the content of their character? That would, I think, be an appropriate exercise in the wake of this tragedy.”

⁴ Barack Obama, August 28, 2013.

Conversations about Race” was initiated several years ago among the faculty at the high school and community leaders to explore how racial differences affect the educational experience and overall atmosphere at the high school. Inspired by this effort at the high school, together with the Second Baptist Church, we decided that a broader conversation about race was needed. In 2012, we decided that it was time to move beyond pulpit exchanges and really learn about each other. We wanted to break down the barriers that exist between the races by engaging in substantive and honest dialogue about how we experience the world based on our race. As people of faith, we felt compelled that we had a moral responsibility to create a stronger and more caring community for everyone. As many of you know, 38 teens from Second Baptist Church and Beth Emet went on a journey this past spring to visit Civil Rights’ sites in the south. The trip was more than a history lesson; it was an opportunity to learn about each other and the different ways we experience the world based on our race and religion. The trip was called Sankofa, a West African word that is best translated as “go back and get it.” The expression suggests that in order to move forward, we need to learn about our past.

The teens met each other for the first time two weeks before we left for the trip. After our orientation, each teen was assigned a partner from the other community with whom to sit on the bus, room with, and reflect on the sites we were visiting. The teens were nervous about having to spend so much time with someone they didn’t know. And when we announced that no phones or other electronic devices would be permitted, that they wouldn’t be able to retreat into the comfort zone of contact with friends and family at home, they worried that this was going to be six days of manufactured awkwardness with a bunch of relative strangers. Again, many of these teens attend the same high school. Nevertheless, they regarded one another as strangers.

And it would be challenging. And it would be uncomfortable. And also eye-opening and amazing. We began with an overnight bus trip to Atlanta, Georgia, where we visited the Martin Luther King Center and got our first taste of racism. Not the historical kind, but right here in the present. Sharing the experience with black teens, our teens began to notice things they’d never noticed before and to witness what black teens experience all the time: white tourists averting their gazes and clutching their purses as the black teens passed by. What was it President Obama had said about recalling how storekeepers had kept an eye on him? Here it was on view for our white teens to see for themselves.

Once the day’s formal activities ended, I noticed that the black teens hung around a group of black teens from Minnesota, while the Beth Emet kids stuck together. Once required integration time was over, everyone retreated to their own groups. I don’t say this as a judgment. It’s natural for people to have an affinity for others like them. But does it become problematic when it precludes us from seeing the world from another’s perspective?

Today on Rosh Hashanah we commemorate the day on which human beings were created. Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the sixth day of creation. What do we learn about human beings from the story of creation? God creates human beings in the image of God—*btzelem Elohim*—which implies that we are all equal. Although we are

all fractals of God, none of us is the same. We are each unique, but being created in the Divine image means we are equally precious and deserving of respect and dignity.

The Talmud illustrates this principle:

“Our Rabbis taught that Adam, the first human being, was created as a single person to show the greatness of the God—the Ruler Who is beyond all Rulers, the Blessed Holy One. For when human rulers [like Caesar, the Roman Emperor who was indeed the ruler in their time and place] mint coins from one mold, they all look the same. But the Blessed Holy One shaped all human beings in the Divine Image, *btzelem Elohim*—in the Image of God.” And, even though they come from the same mold, not one of them resembles another. Each is distinct and unique.”⁵

How well do we respect the diversity of humankind in our country? I would argue not very well. There’s a prevailing attitude in our country that if blacks accept white cultural norms, then maybe they can have a seat at the table of American opportunity. That is, if they can even find a chair. As Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz recently wrote: “Despite rhetoric about the land of opportunity, a young American’s life prospects are more dependent on the income and education of his parents than in almost any other advanced country. And thus, the legacy of discrimination and lack of educational and job opportunity is perpetuated, from one generation to the next.”⁶

Our Sankofa journey was a start at getting us out of the well-worn ruts that interracial relationships often get stuck in. Instead of imposing white cultural norms or spewing platitudes, we opted for partnership and honesty. We didn’t emerge from our trip with definitive answers, but a greater understanding of each other. We learned that without that understanding, we were unlikely to make changes in our society that would improve race relations and lessen discrimination and racism.

There were many eye-opening experiences on our journey. When I was walking through the Birmingham Civil Rights’ museum, Rev. Love, my partner as one of the trip chaperones from Second Baptist Church, commented to me about the downsides of desegregation for the black community. She lamented that desegregation meant that the more educated and financially successful blacks could move out of black neighborhoods, leaving those neighborhoods often impoverished and violence prone. Or when one of the other chaperones, Jerane Ransom, talked about how safe and secure she felt growing up in an entirely black community in Louisiana that supported and protected her. I was naïve: I had never really considered the negative aspects of desegregation. Desegregation opened many doors for blacks, but it also meant for many the loss of tight-knit, supportive communities.

Then there was the evening in Montgomery where we discussed Peggy McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,”⁷ and the teens, both black

⁵ Sanhedrin 38a.

⁶ Joseph Stiglitz, New York Times, 8/29/13.

⁷ Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” <http://nymbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf>

and white, confronted how race has an impact on their daily lives in ways they hadn't paid attention to before. In the article, Peggy McIntosh lists several dozen items that give white people in our society privilege and that have a negative impact on people of color every day. Among the items on her list:

"I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race."

As Jews, living in a predominantly Christian society, we have an inkling of what it means to be an outsider. We want to be treated equally and be respected for our uniqueness without discrimination.

As one of the chaperones on the trip, I thought I knew a little bit about the Civil Rights' Movement, but what I discovered is that my understanding came from a fairly narrow perspective. I was eagerly anticipating crossing the Pettus Bridge in Selma where my childhood rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf and the founding rabbi of Beth Emet, David Polish, had walked with Martin Luther King in support of voting rights. For years, I had wanted to walk in the steps of these giants who had fought boldly against discrimination. But as I prepared to cross the bridge with these rabbis who had walked, relatively unimpeded, with Martin Luther King, my fellow chaperones from Second Baptist Church felt themselves walking with the black protesters who had been beaten senseless on that same bridge by the police on bloody Sunday, a week before the clergy from around the country arrived. We were looking at the same event, but through different lenses.

Then there were the moments when we visited communities that seemed oblivious to how their ideas might be heard by or how they might be hurtful to people outside their own community. There was the rabbi who told the assembled teens that Christianity's god was sometimes dead, sometimes alive, while Judaism's god was always alive. And there was the pastor who told us that those who didn't believe in Jesus were going to hell. Sankofa's Jewish teens had opportunities to cringe, and Sankofa's Christian teens had theirs. We learned that when it comes to myopia, no community is immune.

As the trip unfolded, the conversations became more honest, and we became increasingly aware of our own myopia, our limited perspectives and understandings. The white students began to see how much they take for granted about how easily they move through the world *because they are white*, and the black students felt supported and empowered that there were people outside the black community who cared about their struggles and the injustices they often faced. The black students also began to confront the biases that they have about their own community and how this holds them back. One of the black students said he learned how not all Jews are rich. Still we knew as we were on the long drive back from Memphis at the end of the trip that our journey had just begun. On the way back, the teens spent the entire ride eagerly making plans for how to

continue the conversations and learning we had done; how they could take their experiences and begin to make changes in our community. As we pulled into the parking lot at Beth Emet at 1 a.m., we sang at full volume, “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom,” a Civil Rights’ song that we heard numerous times on the trip and had become our theme song for the journey. There were lots of hugs as we got off the bus.

Since our return, the teens have shared stories about what they notice since they’ve returned from the trip—the segregated lunch tables in the cafeterias, the security guards who check the hall passes of black students, but not white ones, the teacher who busted the black teen for turning his phone on a minute before the bell rang, but didn’t bother the white Beth Emet student who had been listening to her iPod throughout that same class. In this last case, the Beth Emet student asked the teacher why she called out the black boy student, but not her, since she was the one who had infringed the rules throughout the class period.

As we celebrate today the anniversary of the creation of human beings, I’d like us to consider the responsibility that being created in God’s image places on us. From this vantage point, we look critically at the year that has passed, what opportunities we squandered, where we faltered, how we can make amends, and how we want to live in consonance with the values that being created in God’s image confers on us. We close this period of introspection—*yamim noraim*, the days of awe—with the Yom Kippur N’ilah service. In this service, we recite this prayer: “*Mah Anu? What are we? Meh Chayanu? What is our life?*” It contemplates how small we human beings are in comparison to the greatness of God, but how powerful we are because God has endowed us with the ability, “to end the oppression that is in our hands.” When I looked at this prayer recently in preparation for the High Holidays, it made me think about the work of interracial understanding we are doing. We might not have the ability to cure all the ills of our society, but right here in our community it is within our hands to make a real difference in the fight to end the inequities and prejudice that still exist in our society. For Rabbi Polish and Martin Luther King this included working to change the laws of our country. For us, I have learned that since the racism we face today is not enshrined in law, developing relationships with those of a different race is crucial if we are going to build a society that upholds the dignity and worth of every individual. Moreover, we gain personally and we bring greater wholeness and holiness to the world when we broaden our circle of relationships, when we listen to other voices, when we allow ourselves to view the world through another person’s eyes. I can’t claim that this is all that’s needed to bring full equity to our society, but it is an important step that each of us can take.

Our teens have started the journey together. Since our return they have met several times, but, truth be told, it has been difficult to sustain the relationships they made. The chaperones are working with the teens to create the scaffolding that they need to keep their passion for working towards interracial understanding alive. As they continue on their journey in this new year, I invite all of you to join them on this road towards building real understanding among races. We are committed this year to creating more

opportunities for adults in the Beth Emet and Second Baptist community to deepen the conversations and relationships amongst ourselves. In this way we honor the spirit of this day which commemorates that all of us, regardless of gender, religion, race, ethnicity are each unique and precious images of the Divine.

After the trip some of the teens wrote a collective memoir of their experience at the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King was assassinated. This moving and insightful piece concluded as follows:

“When we got back on the bus, we talked about the quote that was on the plaque in front of the balcony Martin Luther King was assassinated on. It went something like, "You can kill the dreamer, but you cannot kill the dream," and that really stood out to us. We were the dream: riding in that bus, talking, and thinking about carrying out our ideas and continuing our relationships. That's what Sankofa was about; the realization that we *are* the dream. The realization that we need to fight to keep that dream alive and to not give up.

The journey does not stop here; our journey together has just begun.

Together, black and white, Jewish and Christian, we took in the end of the dreamer, but not the dream.”⁸

Together, let's keep the dream alive.

⁸ [Collective Memoir](#) written and performed by Thulani Thomas, Leor Miller, Liora London, Sarina Elenbogen-Siegel, Christian Horn, Sydney Ransom, Rena Newman, Jasmane Quinn.