

Rabbi Andrea London
Beth Emet The Free Synagogue
A Social Justice Selfie
Yom Kippur morning 2015/5776

“What’s your name?” I asked the black man with salt and pepper dreadlocks and beard who was carrying the American flag at the head of the march. “Middle Passage,” he replied. “Middle Passage?” I repeated, not certain I had heard him correctly. It was not a name I expected to hear. That morning I had met Sheila who worked at the University of Michigan in the IT Department and was on a leave of absence to participate in the march. I met Keshia who was starting a business to support entrepreneurs in Detroit, and I met Jamal, a military veteran, who was our drill sergeant; he was responsible for making sure we walked in tight formation on the South Carolina highways.

Each of these people was exceptional. During my day of participation in the NAACP Journey for Justice, I met many such extraordinary people. But Middle Passage stood out—physically because of his dreadlocks and the fact that he had been leading the march every day carrying the American flag and, needless to say, he stood out because of his name. I never learned his birth name. At some point in his life, he had adopted a new name recalling the treacherous Middle Passage of the 17th and 18th centuries – the brutal route that many Africans took aboard ships delivering them to slavery in North America. When I met him, Middle Passage had been on the NAACP Journey for Justice for close to four weeks, having walked over 500 miles from the starting point in Selma, Alabama to where we were that day on August 27 outside of Columbia, South Carolina. He had left his life partner and traveled by bus from his home in Colorado to join this historic march in honor of the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. He was a Vietnam War veteran and a man who believed in the cause—specifically, preserving the Voting Rights Act, whose purpose had been to ensure that in places where minorities had been systematically prevented from voting, special scrutiny would be given to make sure voting was fair and open to everyone. In 2013, the law was significantly weakened when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the heart of the act, allowing nine states that had previously fallen under the act’s monitoring provisions to change their election laws without federal approval. The NAACP had organized what they were calling a “Journey for Justice” to bring light to this issue and increase support for legislation to ensure that the right to vote is really accessible to all. This journey, however, did not stop in Montgomery like the voting rights march of 1965; it kept going all the way to Washington, D.C. to bring its message of justice straight to the federal government.

I had arrived in South Carolina on the evening of August 26 with two Beth Emet members, Wendy Yanow and Leslie Yamshon, and the new senior pastor at Evanston’s Second Baptist Church, Michael Nabors and his daughter, Spencer. After a late flight and a drive through the dark night, we arrived at our sleeping quarters, an army base in Eastover, SC. After a fitful night in barracks that, for unknown reasons were more refrigerated than air-conditioned, we got up at dawn to meet up with the Journey for Justice and start the day’s march. Bleary-eyed, but in high spirits, we were ready to start walking after a large helping of grits and a few cups of coffee.

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism was one of the co-sponsors of the march, and when I received an email that they were looking for rabbis to participate in a march to highlight issues of voting rights in our country, mass incarceration of people of color, and inequality in public school education, I responded immediately. The tag line for the journey was, "Our Lives, Our Votes, Our Jobs, and Our Schools Matter." Over the last several years, as I have developed relationships with people at the Second Baptist Church and been involved at ETHS in conversations about disparities in education based on race, I've had my eyes opened to the ways in which institutional racism is still very much alive. I've become passionate about confronting these issues and creating a more equitable society. I called Pastor Nabors and suggested we go together since our two communities have been talking about and working on these issues in our own community. He knew about the work that our communities had been doing together before his arrival and the joint teen trip that I led two years ago with Pastor Velda Love, one of the pastors from the church, in which we intensively explored the issues of racism in our society while traveling to civil rights sites in the south. That trip included marching over the Pettus Bridge in Selma, the site of Bloody Sunday and the beginning of what became the march to Montgomery that led to the enactment of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Pastor Nabors responded yes enthusiastically.

I am very proud that over 200 Reform rabbis responded to the call and marched with the Torah in front of the line for the whole journey, right next to Middle Passage who was carrying the flag. The march began on August 1 in Selma and concluded last Wednesday, September 16 in Washington. To march not only with rabbinic colleagues but with Beth Emet members and Pastor Nabors and his daughter was especially wonderful because it conveyed the message that combating issues of racial inequality is important for our all of us regardless of race.

The trip commemorated the 50th anniversary of the voting rights march, but was also organized in response to the growing awareness of how people of color suffer disproportionately from police brutality and the horrific murders of black worshipers in Charleston, South Carolina. Over the past year, names like Michael Brown and Freddie Gray have become household names as we watched protests erupt in Ferguson, MO and Baltimore, Maryland after these men died at the hands of police. And Dylann Roof murdering worshipers at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, sent shock waves throughout our country. As we watched these events unfold, the faith community in Evanston responded with prayer vigils and demonstrations that mourned those who died and expressed concern for the police here in Evanston and around the country who are often caught in difficult circumstances in their line of work.

As a spiritual response to violence in our community, Minister Brian Smith from Second Baptist created a ritual of anointing blocks in Evanston with olive oil to consecrate them for holy and peaceful purposes like the vessels that were anointed by the priests in the Tabernacle. Every Saturday, he leads a group of people to anoint one square block and pray for its residents. Olive oil is poured on the corner, a prayer is said and then the assembled group walks down the street, praying for the residents and the businesses they

pass. This is repeated until a square block has been anointed. Last December, Min. Smith came to Beth Emet and helped us anoint the block around Beth Emet. His goal is to anoint the whole city and to spread this ritual to other cities as well. One Saturday shortly after the policeman who killed Michael Brown was not indicted by the grand jury, Min. Smith led his block-anointing group in prayer at the Evanston Police Department.

Min. Smith has a big heart and soul, but what he did with the Evanston Police Department shows more than the quality of his character; it recognizes that achieving racial justice is not about indicting the conduct of individual people, it's about taking a critical look at our criminal justice system and making systemic changes that will bring greater equity and safety to all. The police cried when Min. Smith prayed with them; their jobs are hard and they are also in need of healing and support.

Middle Passage had a similar kindness he extended to police on the Journey for Justice. As Cornell Brooks, the president and CEO of the NAACP remarked about him: "I loved to hear Middle Passage gently note the importance of both addressing racial profiling and reaching out to our brothers and sisters in blue – who behind their badges and guns are human beings like all of us. I well recall Middle Passage saying to state troopers at the top of his voice at the top of the day, "show me some love"—and then giving them a strong shoulder bump.

After walking 17 miles in the hot South Carolina sun, we ended our day at the Pee Dee Union Baptist Church in the town of Cheraw. As we entered the church, tired and sunburned, we were greeted by the Cheraw police chief and then the Baptist choir which got us back on our sore feet to sing and be inspired by the spirit that pervaded the church that evening. We also had the special treat of hearing Cornell Brooks preach. Not only is he a Yale trained lawyer, but he's an AME preacher.

The image he left us with that evening is that we as a society need to take a Social Justice Selfie. He turned a self-focused image of pictures of ourselves into a call to action for justice. He challenged us to assess how well our country is living up to its ideals of justice and fairness for all when voting rights for minorities are curtailed and when African Americans now constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population. Together, African American and Hispanics comprised 58% of all prisoners in 2008, even though African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately one quarter of the U.S. population. These inequalities not only keep many people of color in poverty, but they harm our whole society which loses the productivity of segments of our society and when despair leads to violence.

And lest we be tempted to comfort ourselves with the notion that Blacks and Hispanics fill our corporate-run prisons because they are the ones who commit all the crimes, the U.S. Sentencing Commission reported that prison sentences of black men were nearly 20% longer than those of white men for similar crimes.¹ Despite using and selling drugs at rates similar to those of their white counterparts, African Americans and Latinos

¹ Palazzolo, Joe, "Racial Gap in Men's Sentencing," *Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 2013.

comprise 62 percent of those in state prisons for drug offenses.² Imprisonment is detrimental to families and communities and reduces the upward mobility of people of color in our society, contributing to the cycle of poverty. Is this racism? Is it better access to expensive lawyers who can argue for a reduced sentence? We need to take a social justice selfie and find out.

We need to remind ourselves that although Evanston Township High School has been consciously working on issues of racial inequity, my daughter can saunter through the halls of the school during class without a hall pass but sees black students being reprimanded for the same behavior. We need to remind ourselves that studies repeatedly show teachers from pre-school on up setting lower academic expectations for students of color. What's going on here? We need to take a social justice selfie and find out.

That evening in Cheraw, South Carolina, I was reminded that the Black Church has been an important center for social justice activism. Can synagogues also fulfill this function?

Isaiah this morning called us to do so:

Is this the fast I desire? A day to afflict body and soul? Bowing your head like a reed, covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast—a day worthy of the favor of Adonai? Is not this the fast I desire—to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home, and never to neglect your own flesh and blood? Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall quickly heal.³

What do we see in our social justice selfie?

The Religions Action Center of Reform Judaism along with the NAACP has some specific pieces of legislation that it is pushing, including The Voting Rights Advancement Act and the End Racial Profiling Act. The Voting Rights Act recognizes that changing demographics require tools that protect voters nationwide—especially voters of color, voters who rely on languages other than English, and voters with disabilities. It also requires that jurisdictions make voting changes public and transparent.

The End Racial Profiling Act seeks to address the injustice of racial profiling—the practice of law enforcement relying on race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity in selecting which individuals to subject to routine or spontaneous investigation.

After the holidays, I will send more information about these bills and how you can support them.

² “8 Facts You Should Know About the Criminal Justice System and People of Color,” *Center for American Progress*, Jamal Hagler, May 28, 2015.

³ Isaiah 58:5-8.

Perhaps you don't feel like you understand well enough or would like to deepen your understanding of what has led to the current racial inequities in our society and how we might best address them. As part of our ongoing efforts at Beth Emet to understand and combat racial injustice, this fall we are offering a class called "Race: The Power of an Illusion" that will do just that. It will be facilitated by David Futransky and Wendy Yanow. I hope you will avail yourself of this opportunity.

The issue of racial justice is important, but it's not the only issue we see in our social justice selfie. Gun violence continues to plague our streets and homes. Who is to blame? Certainly those who use guns in criminal acts need to be held to account. But what about those who manufacture the guns and then lobby to keep them legal and plentiful as well as the politicians who take those lobbyists money?

Our changing climate threatens our planet and our lives, and the poor will suffer most. Who is responsible? Certainly all of us who live comfortably thanks to fossil fuel. But what about the industries that lobby to keep those fuels cheap and plentiful rather than promoting alternative energy sources? His Holiness Pope Francis has focused attention on the Climate Change crisis by issuing an encyclical to call attention to this global crisis. And just a few weeks ago, the ongoing crisis in Syria, which has ravaged that country and taken so many lives, came into focus because of the dire refugee crisis, illustrated most disturbingly by a picture of a little boy face down, drowned in the ocean.

The Jewish immigrant aid society, HIAS, has taken a leadership role on this issue and has issued a petition encouraging President Obama to play an active role in the crisis. HIAS is reminding people that we are told many times in the Torah that we are to love the stranger, to welcome the stranger, and to protect the stranger. This is not just a commandment but also a central Jewish value. Our forebears Abraham and Sarah opened their tent wide and welcomed guests to take refuge in their home, providing them with food and drink and a place to rest. The HIAS petition has been circulated in the last two EmetMails and is included in today's service sheet. People in the congregation have asked me for more information about the Syrian crisis and how they can help so I invited my friend, Dr. Zaher Sahloul, to come to Beth Emet this afternoon. Dr. Sahloul, who some of you have met because he's been to Beth Emet before, is a Syrian physician who has been actively involved in the Syrian crisis, sending medical supplies and traveling often to Syrian refugee camps in Turkey. He will be with us during our adult study session to give us his perspective on the crisis in Syria and with Syrian refugees. Additionally, today is not only a holiday in the Jewish calendar, but this is the season that Muslims make the Hajj to Mecca. Today is a fast day and tomorrow is the Muslim holiday of Eid Al Adha when Muslims remember the near sacrifice, in Islamic tradition, of Ishmael by his father, Abraham. Dr. Sahloul will also share teachings about this holiday and its customs.

In our social justice selfie we see many issues of injustice and poverty that plague our communities and our world. In each of your own social justice selfies, there may be other issues that speak most directly to you. Each of us has causes and organizations to which we commit time, money, and passion. Before Chanukah this year, the newly revised

Tzedakah committee is planning a Tzedekah Fair at which people within our community can share with others information about the organizations they support. And the newly comprised Social Action Opportunities committee is seeking ways to bring Beth Emet members together for volunteer service. My hope is that we'll find others in the Beth Emet community who share our passions so that we can advance the cause of justice together.

As we were marching in South Carolina, Cornell Brooks commented that however the Torah scroll was held, in the right arm or in the left, it always covers the heart, reminding us that our values are not meant to stay inside the walls of the synagogue, but must be firmly implanted in our hearts so that its teachings can be realized wherever we journey.

On Sunday, Sept. 13, some 900 miles into the Journey for Justice, Middle Passage collapsed during the march and died. On the hour and a half bus ride back to the army barracks the day we marched, our own Leslie Yamshon sat with Middle Passage and learned about his life and the quality of his character. He was active politically and was planning on running for office. He felt he had a mission and that five open-heart surgeries were not going to get in the way of his making a difference in this world. He cared about people and the values of freedom and opportunity symbolized by the American flag he marched with next to the Torah scroll. Middle Passage did not complete the journey, but he touched many lives and hearts along the way. Martin Luther King didn't complete the journey and neither did Moses who we heard from this morning in the Book of Deuteronomy on the edge of the Promised Land, shortly before his death, urging us to choose a life of blessing. None of us can carry the mantle of justice and freedom alone. We struggle and work together, each of us contributing our small part, knowing that it's insufficient but with the faith that each of us doing our part has and will make a vital difference. *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin l'hibateil mimena*—It's not up to us to complete the journey, but neither are we free to desist from it.⁴ So we continue to march on together in the memory of Moses, and Martin Luther King, and Middle Passage and the many who have come before us, and at the urging of Isaiah. May we be moved by Isaiah's call to turn our fast into concrete action for justice, inspired by the commitments and accomplishments of those who went before us. Together, we join hands and continue that journey to the Promised Land of peace, justice, and freedom for all.

⁴ Pirke Avot 2:21.