

Talk for MLK Lunch in Ithaca, NY

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Fulfilling the Dream: On Privilege and Solidarity

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Introduction:

It is such an honor to speak to you on this sacred day honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one of the greatest prophetic figures of all time. Thank you especially to Marcia Fort, the extraordinary executive director of GIAC, and to Ellen Baer and the planning committee.

For the past year and a half, I have come to Ithaca once a month to serve Congregation Tikkun v'Or and I am struck by the large number of people in this wonderful town engaged in the holy work of social justice/tikkun Olam, repair of the World. I have already had the privilege of meeting so many extraordinary and inspiring local activists. Social Justice/Tikkun Olam/Repair of the World is the core religious vision and commitment of our congregation, Tikkun v'Or, and it is such an honor to speak to you today as their rabbi.

Marcia asked me to reflect on what I have learned in my life about working to end racism and how we might strengthen the anti-racism work in this community. In my talk today I hope to distill what I have learned from my own life experience, from the teachings of Dr. King and how this may relate to Ithaca, all in 20 minutes!

Privilege

When I reflect about what I have learned from my life about working to end racism in South Africa, Israel and America, I am profoundly aware that I speak from the vantage point of a person that has enjoyed economic, racial and ethnic privilege. I was born into racial privilege in South Africa, I enjoyed ethnic privilege as a Jew in Israel, and for the past thirty-five years I have benefited as a white from racial privilege in America. The lessons I have to teach about ending racism are rooted in this experience of privilege.

I grew up in Sea Point, a gorgeous suburb of Cape Town, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, in Apartheid South Africa. My entire community was white: my friends, my family, my teachers, and my neighborhood. Black and Brown people were those who served us. The closest person of color I knew as a child and teenager was Myrtle Cupido, the domestic worker in our home. The Black children I saw in my neighborhood wore tattered clothes, often had no shoes and called me "Baas" master, as did their parents. A brutal system of institutionalized racism divided us into Whites

and Blacks, us and them, the privileged and the oppressed.

From the earliest time I can remember this reality troubled me greatly. It violated my sense of fairness and justice. It violated the religious values I learned in my Jewish day school about the imperative to honor the dignity of all human beings. No less than 36 times the Torah referred to the experience of the Israelites in Egypt: "You shall not oppress the other as you know the soul of the other for you were the other in the Land of Egypt." My reality in Apartheid South Africa was in stark contrast to the story of my people as victims of anti-Semitism ending in the Holocaust. Never Again! was what I was taught. As Jews we thought of ourselves as victims, and yet I was a white Jew with privilege, part of a vicious and brutal system of racism that killed, oppressed and destroyed human beings.

I felt guilty and ashamed about the way my community mistreated and exploited Blacks. One of the most painful events of my childhood was seeing my own father, a good man who taught me to respect all human beings, humiliate the black workers in his store with callous, racist disrespect. I felt pride in the Jews who courageously opposed Apartheid in disproportionate numbers and troubled by the way most of our community enjoyed the material blessings of our privileged status and worse, accepted, willingly or unwillingly, the racism of Apartheid.

Despite the material comfort of my racial privilege, I felt profound despair and enormous fear. There was no good outcome that I could envision. Either this violent and unjust system of racial oppression would continue or, like most other whites, I thought Black South Africans would rise up and kill us all.

The question of how to respond as a person of privilege to injustice is one that I experienced not only as a child in South Africa, but also one I have wrestled with in Israel and here in America. It is Dr. King and the vision of the Civil Rights movement that provided me with an answer to the question.

Beloved Community

Dr. King made it clear the struggle was not against whites, it was about creating a loving and just community, **a Beloved community**, where everyone is given dignity, equality and love. For Dr. King it was not about an "us" and a "them", it was about **building a community of love and justice for all**, here in America and in the world as a whole.

Dr. King understood the deep connection between love and justice:

He taught: "Love that does not satisfy justice is no love at all. Love at it's best is justice concretized." The beloved community is a community of love that joins together to concretize justice. In this community all were

welcome, black and white, privileged and oppressed.

As a white South African I made a choice to join the struggle for a democratic South Africa, as a Jew I choose to support equal rights of all who live in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza and as a white person in America for the past 37 years, I choose to support human rights including economic rights for all.

As a person of privilege, I have chosen to take responsibility to unlearn my own prejudice and racism. I have chosen to educate my own community about our prejudices, about the effect of our actions and our silence on our fellow human beings, and about the consequences our failure to live up to our own religious and human values.

I have chosen to use the benefits of my privilege to serve justice for all. .

I have chosen to follow the lead of those who are oppressed, to respond to their request for support.

These choices in response to my own privilege are not an expression of guilt, but rather a joyful choice that has allowed me to break the isolation, disconnection and fear that are an integral part of living with privilege. It has allowed me to live my highest ideals.

There are also some costs to such a decision by a person of privilege. There are people in one's community who will resist any questioning of the status quo and may view one as a traitor to one's racial or ethnic group. This experience is difficult and painful and often the major deterrent to people of privilege challenging injustice.

When I emigrated from South Africa, first to Israel and then to America I had idealized images of both countries. I naively thought that I was moving to countries with much greater freedom and equality than in South Africa. In Israel I had to confront the dispossession of the Palestinians and the systemic discrimination against Palestinians both in Israel and in the Occupied Territories. And in America I had to confront the engrained institutionalized racism of this country.

Racism in America

It took me a long time to understand how racism works in America. In South Africa the racism was vicious and it was public and clear. Over the years I have come to understand that racism in America even after the Civil Rights movement is every bit as vicious as the racism of Apartheid yet it is veiled and/or denied.

Citizenship Exam and the Havurah

Two particular moments of revelation in this regard:

When I took my citizenship exam in Philadelphia, my lawyer (having a lawyer was itself a benefit of my economic and racial privilege) pointed out that there were two rooms, one where most or all of the people would become citizens and the other across the hall where people would be denied. The room I was in was overwhelmingly white and the room across the hallway was predominantly people of color. There were no signs "whites only" like in South Africa, yet there could have been.

Another story: I was part of a havurah, a counter-cultural, progressive Jewish religious fellowship. I still remember the day on which I discovered by chance that an apartment block, where many of my friends who were members of the havurah lived, did not rent apartments to Blacks. It was such a shock. I naively thought that such a thing was impossible. In South Africa the racism was blatant, clear, public and ugly but here in America it was hidden with euphemisms and in code.

Institutionalized Racism

Institutionalized racial oppression in America is hidden and all whites benefit from that racial oppression. All whites in America enjoy white privilege. As a white person in America my chances of being stopped by a police officer for a drug check is three times less than that of a African American, I have much less chance of being incarcerated, of being poor, of facing blatant prejudice, of receiving good schooling or of facing housing discrimination. As a white person the chances are that I will have access to more wealth. **As a person with racial privilege, the most basic responsibility is not to collude in the pretense that this racial privilege doesn't exist.** Acknowledging the privilege is the first essential step.

This is not a question of guilt. People of privilege are not guilty. We did not create the system that gives us unearned advantages but we do have a choice whether we pretend such a system doesn't exist and whether we join in Beloved community with all who are seeking a society of equity and justice. This is what solidarity is about and this is what I am called to do as a white person living in a racist society.

As a religious Jew, the image of Rabbi Abram Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. King in Selma is one of the most powerful and inspiring visual images. Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel became friends and when Dr. King asked his friend to come to march with him in Selma, Rabbi Heschel had to make a choice. He made a choice to go, to risk injury, to be in solidarity with his friend and the struggle of the Civil Rights movement. He made a choice for justice. I believe that this is the fundamental choice we all need to make. We need to join together to transform our society.

The Civil Rights movement ended the denial of voting rights and other basic rights to African Americans. Dr. King's vision was far deeper than just ending racial discrimination. Dr. King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to "save the soul of America."

In his courageous address, A Time to Break Silence, at the Riverside Church Dr. King said:

"For it's very survival's stake, America must reexamine the old presuppositions and release itself from the many things that for centuries have been held sacred. **For the evils of racism, poverty, and militarism to die, a new set of values must be born.** Our economy must become more person centered than property and profit centered. Our government must depend more on its moral power than on its military power.

Let us therefore not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate the Negro into all existing values of American society. Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny, to a new vision of compassion, to a more noble expression of humaneness"

This is Dr. King's prophetic vision. This is his challenge to us. We can choose to join together across economic, racial and cultural lines to build a country with a people centered, sustainable peace economy.

And we can join together across race, culture and economic class, to do this here in Ithaca. At the breakfast on Saturday, Marcia Forte referred to the bumper sticker that reads: "Ithaca 10 square miles surrounded by reality." She reminded us that Ithaca is ten square miles of reality.

Ithaca is a very special place with amazing people **and** it also reflects the racial and economic inequity in America as a whole. Could we join together in Ithaca co created the community that Dr. King envisioned? What would it take to end poverty in Ithaca? What would it take to end racism in Ithaca? What would it take to create a sustainable economy that protects our environment and provides for everyone?

There are so many exciting projects in this community that are beginning to address this exciting and challenging task: The Building Bridges project, Dorothy Cotton Institute, the Talking Circles and many others. As a newcomer and a person who doesn't live in the town, I don't know all the wonderful initiatives.

Today each of us is called to make a deeper commitment to building a loving, just and sustainable community here in Ithaca. Each of us is called to build relationships across culture, race, class and faith. Each and every one of us has an important contribution we can make to build the Beloved community.

We have an opportunity to build on the extraordinary courage of people in our own country in the Occupy Movement and in the Arab world engaged in nonviolent resistance demanding freedom and justice. How can Ithaca strengthen the Occupy movement and ensure that America is on the side of those in the streets of America and the Arab world demanding justice?

What better way to honor the extraordinary vision of love and justice envisioned by Dr. King?

As he said:

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered people have torn down, people other-centered can build. I still believe we shall overcome."

May we all pray with our feet, our minds, our hearts. May the Source of love and justice bless our efforts.

Thank You