

## American Pilgrimage

I love that menorah right there at the back of our bimah. I love it because you can see it in the video of Martin Luther King. It was right behind him when he came to speak to our congregation, brought here by our own Rabbi Max Nussbaum.

I had that speech in mind when I went with Briskin Elementary School's sixth graders to the American south. Before I left, I was looking for a word that means the opposite of a pilgrimage. That's why *I thought* I was going to the south. Our country is in the midst of a profound reckoning with racial injustice. And, I am part of that reckoning. For much of my life I was comfortable believing - more or less - in the American meritocracy, the idea that skill and hard work lead to success. I was aware of our horrific racist past, but I believed, that we had, - more or less - moved beyond it.

I remember an article I read on an airplane in 2015 about Rodricus Crawford, a Black man whose one-year-old died in the middle of the night. While enduring that unbearable grief, he was charged with the murder of his baby. He was convicted and sentenced to death. Crawford was ultimately exonerated, but the trial was just dripping with racism. From the 911 dispatcher who said, "They probably slept on the damn baby. There's a hundred folks in that damn house," to the confederate statue on the front lawn of the courthouse, with the tribute "to the deeds and valor of the men who so gallantly, nobly, and contentiously defended the cause," to the evidence of pneumonia and sepsis in the pathology reports that were entirely dismissed as possible causes of the child's death.

That article woke me up to the vast inequities that are simply woven into the fabric of our country and its systems. Wrongful convictions, to be sure. In addition - housing segregation,

inequal education, political disenfranchisement, hindered opportunity, and on it goes. The list of ways in which we have *not* overcome racism. We have reshaped it, given it new expression, and new outlets.

So, I thought that trip was going to be an anti-pilgrimage. If racism is pulsing through our nation, the south has historically been its heartbeat, it's center. The place to go to confront our capacity for inhumanity.

But as soon as I got there, I realized that I was also on a pilgrimage, of sorts. Because at the very same moment that the south was home to our worst institutionalized atrocities the south is also teeming with inspiration and holiness. And there is nowhere better to inspire holy action.

We met one of our educators, Dr. Martha Bouyer at Kelly Ingram park in Birmingham. Before we started, she pointed to the street, where a broken fire hydrant was spewing out water. "Well, that's perfect for what we are going to see," She said, "Take a look at the power of that water," she asked the students, "What do you think it would feel like if someone used it to attack you?" We were standing at the very site of the infamous fire hoses and attack dogs that were unleashed on the city's children. Nearly 1,000 children were arrested in Birmingham when they marched for integration on City Hall. They packed the city's jails. Why were so many children involved? In a documentary about Birmingham, Dr. Carolyn McKinstry recalls, "The children were the ones that volunteered. Most of the adults were afraid...".

Birmingham was a hotbed of civil rights and political activity. Ruled by segregationists after segregation was found unconstitutional, the city was boiling over with marches, protests, and then their violent suppression. And then one day, Birmingham stood still. It was September

15, 1963, exactly sixty years ago yesterday. Our guide, Dr. Martha Bouyer, lived in a mining camp outside of the city. She went outside that morning to pick up her family's newspaper and heard an explosion. That was the bomb that went off inside 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, killing four girls who were right about her age.

Dr. McKinstry was inside the church. She can tell you exactly where she was standing when the bomb went off and when she learned that some of her friends never came out. She can also tell you about the follow up:

"Monday morning I was at school at eight o'clock. There was no silent prayer. There was no assembly. No one ever asked, 'Are you OK? Do you want to talk about what happened? Do you miss your friends? Are you afraid?' It settled very well in my thoughts, my spirit that you can kill Black people in Birmingham and nothing happen(s)."<sup>1</sup> That would have been September 16, 1963, sixty years ago today.

We have a fleeting opportunity to meet the people who felt the ground shake underneath them. We have a fleeting opportunity to ask them now, "Do you want to talk about what happened? Did you miss your friends? Were you afraid?"

And that is as important as any pilgrimage I can think of. To be clear – not because the people of Birmingham need us. But because we need them. To understand America.

What is a pilgrimage? A religious obligation. A sacred journey. An encounter that changes us. In Judaism, three of our holidays used to be celebrated by making pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot are called the *shalosh regalim*, the three leg days because they started with walking. You had to leave your home and go somewhere to meet

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<sup>1</sup> Alabama Public Television Documentaries, *Shuttlesworth*. <https://www.pbs.org/video/shuttlesworth-ycjef9/>

God. You had to center yourself in the Jewish consciousness that is tied to that particular space. You had to feel the sights and sounds and smells that are only there. And when you got home renewed and recharged, you had shared something with everyone in the community, near and far. It was a fundamental spiritual foundation.

Every time we hear a story or tell a story, we don't just witness a truth, we create a truth. The truth of the south has got to be a foundation of our shared American spiritual consciousness.

That's the only way toward better future. If there is one thing we Jews know it is the boundless power of a story. A story is about a moment in time and so much more than that moment in time. That's the reason that we read such narratives of the first Jewish family on Rosh HaShana. And then we read them again. Every single year. They are about Sarah and Hagar and Abraham and Isaac and Ishmael. And they are about us. And the messes we make of being parents, children, siblings and spouses. They are about the ways that we all do are best but we can be threatened and frightened, passive and sometimes cruel. When the entire Jewish family comes together, why would we, the descendants of Sarah, read these words:

“Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to him, ‘Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 21:9-10, JPS translation.

And, later, “When the water was gone..., [Hagar] left the child under the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, “Let me not look on the child as he dies.” And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.”<sup>3</sup>

We read these words because confronting our deepest wounds and darkest impulses is the same thing as refusing to be ruled by them. Keeping those stories alive is, in and of itself, a call to action. So too, the stories of Birmingham, Alabama.

That’s what the Ba’al Shem Tov meant when he taught that, “In remembrance is the secret of redemption.” If you think going to the south is about long-ago history, consider the Alabama State Legislature. The United States Supreme Court ruled that it had violated the Voting Rights Act in drawing a district map that did not reflect data from the 2020 census. There was one majority-Black district and the court ordered that lines be redrawn in order to add a second. Just this summer, the governor nonetheless signed the original map, with one district, into law. His reasoning, “We know better.”

And if you think going to the south is about the south, take the time to read the report of the California Task Force to Study and Develop Reparations Proposals for African Americans. As those proposals get addressed in our state, we will talk about them. For now, and for the sake of the truth telling which is what we are talking about now, please read the report. It’s devastating. Thousands of enslaved Americans in California. Prominent Angelenos with ties to the KKK, government-financed whites-only neighborhoods, vast current health and wealth disparities, schools in Black neighborhoods, as recently as 2021, that could not afford paper.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 21:16 JPS translation.

I want to pause to say a word about us. We are not all the same. We are not all white. We are not all Jews. Still, we might be thinking, “what about the very same housing covenants that prohibited Jews?” and “what about the atrocities we faced? That we had to overcome in order to get where we are today?” All of that is true. And important. And a different topic. It comes up because we have a reflex. I have it too. A reflex when we get this close to these painful truths and sense an implied accusation that we are on the wrong side of all of it. And we’re going to have to relinquish our identity and our sacred stories in order to do what is right.

I want to share with you the work of Dr. Darren Graves, who teaches educators, parents, and children about disrupting racism in schools and in communities. Central to his work are the following three points

1. This work is not about teaching white [people]<sup>4</sup> they should feel guilty about being white. It IS about helping all [people] feel a sense of agency about making communities more equitable.
2. This work is not about casting the US as an irredeemable project. It IS about celebrating people of all backgrounds who have been resilient and stood on beautiful principles.
3. This work is not about instilling hopelessness, apathy, and blame-throwing. It IS about building a sense of critical hope and celebrating the beauty of the work.<sup>5</sup>

You might also be thinking, “OK, but what does she want us to do?” I have two answers to that question. One is - I don’t know yet. There are ways that we can, and will, become active.

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<sup>4</sup> “people” substituted for “kids”.

<sup>5</sup> From Dr. Graves’ presentation, *Engaging Families to Achieve Racial Equity in Schools*.

But if we fast forward to a flurry of activity, we might miss the point. We might miss the reckoning. What I want us to do first is spend some time deepening our understanding. Take it in. Learn as much as we can. Listen to stories, affirm stories, tell stories. In remembrance is the secret to redemption.

The other is, I would like you to go on American pilgrimage with me. To the south. Our tenth graders Religious School students are going this winter. Briskin's current sixth graders will go in the Spring. And I'm leading an adult trip the first week in April. And, if you can't travel, there are other ways to take this journey. In fact, we are bringing a little bit of the experience right here, next week so that we will all have the opportunity. Joanne Bland was our educator and guide in Selma. She will be our Yom Kippur afternoon guest speaker. I didn't tell her story this morning because I want to you to hear it from her. Selma is her home and she lived every minute of the struggle for civil rights there.

Do you know what the opposite of pilgrimage is? Standing still, staying in place.

The first stop on our trip last May was the King Center in Atlanta, which promotes education, research, and social change. It is also a tribute to Dr. King and Coretta Scott King and their final resting place. It was there that I realized I was engaged in a religious obligation, a sacred journey. An encounter that would change me. I looked into the faces of our students, not quite Bnai Mitzvah age. They were standing in front of the central feature in the courtyard, a huge fountain, built look like a teeming, yet remarkably peaceful river. On it are the words of the prophet Amos, famously adapted by Dr. King. "We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water. And righteousness like a mighty stream."

I love that menorah on our bimah. And knowing that Dr. King stood right here. But if we think that means we have done what we need to do for racial justice, then we are standing still, staying in place, choosing to be satisfied. I have another idea. Let's keep learning. And reckoning. And working. And partnering. And galvanizing. Let's keep at it. Until justice rolls down like water. And righteousness like a mighty stream.

Shana Tova.