



## “WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER”

There is an ancient Jewish story, a midrash, about a couple of people who go on a boat ride together. Now it’s not a big boat, just a small skiff, a wooden boat. (you might have heard me tell this one before) Anyway, they row out into the middle of a deep lake and then put up their oars. They enjoy the breeze, they enjoy each other’s company for a while. After a bit, one of them puts her feet up and begins to nap. Suddenly, she’s wrenched from her sleep by a sound like this “zh,zh,zh” Through her sleepy eyes, she couldn’t be sure what she was seeing, but as the fog lifts, she bolts upright and says, “What are you doing?” You see, her companion had taken out a large hand drill and appeared to be drilling a hole under his seat in the boat. “Oh, this? Don’t worry” he said casually, “I’m only making a hole under MY seat. It doesn’t concern you.”

Now you know, and I know, and frankly the ancient Rabbis knew too, that no one is crazy enough to think that putting a hole under your own seat wouldn’t sink the the boat for everyone! So, obviously, there’s something else they’re trying to say with this story and what they’re saying is - it matters. What we do and what we don’t do matters not just for us, but because we’re all in this boat together. And that’s one of the main teachings of our entire Torah - we are in this together and it matters - what you do or what you don’t do.

When someone asked Rabbi Hillel to boil down the Torah to a twitter-length main idea, he said #Whatyouwouldhate - don’t do to someone else.



It’s ridiculously simple and nonetheless hard for most of us to apply broadly in our lives.

What if we turned the boat story around? What if it went like this instead: A couple of people were paddling around the lake on a sunny afternoon. Under the seat of one, a hole sprung up and started ever-so-slowly to spill water into the boat. The person sitting on the seat above it could see the hole, but didn’t have any tools to stop it up. The person on the other seat said, “Oh man, that’s too bad about the hole under your seat. You should have taken better care of it. I mean, I didn’t make the hole and I don’t really know what I could do to fix it anyway.”



#YESyouARE your brother’s keeper

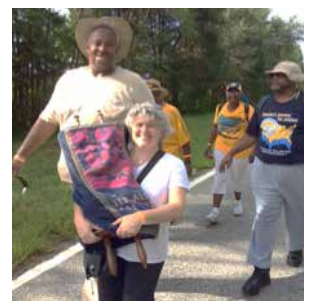
Because we’re all in this together. And it matters what we do and what we don’t do.

As many of you have seen on Facebook, or heard me say last night under the stars, last week, I walked 14 miles through rural Virginia carrying a Torah with these incredible people.



Ours was the 39th day of the 46 day, 1000-mile journey from Selma, AL to Washington DC. NAACP’s 40-day march from Selma, Al to Washington, DC, calling for a national re-commitment to the rights of every American. On every day of the march, at least one Reform Rabbi has been present to carry the Torah - nearly 200 of us doing what the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said when he marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “Praying with our feet”

I went on the march because I have become aware that while my seat might be just fine there are so many people whose seats are riddled with holes, who don’t have seats at all, who somehow aren’t even in the boat, who are drowning while I enjoy the view from the deck.



We marched to say - Our Lives, Our Jobs, Our Votes and Our Schools Matter

I want to talk to the young people directly for a minute and forgive me if you already know some of this. Back before the 1960's - before I was born and WAY before you were born, there were lots of laws that kept black people from doing lots of things white people were allowed to do.



Some of you - I hope - have learned in school about the demonstrations, the sit-ins at lunch counters, and the legal work that went into changing those bad laws.



Rabbi Lieberman was the Rabbi here at BHC in those days and he gave sermons about it. One of them was 51 years ago today - on Rosh Hashana. A lot of people didn't like those sermons because they felt like it wasn't their problem and it was going to be really hard to fix the problem anyway. And some of them didn't like the sermons because they were racists - meaning they truly believed that Black people weren't as good as them.

After one of those sermons, a man came up to Rabbi Lieberman and said, "Rabbi, I want to help. What should I do?" Rabbi Lieberman told him "You need to hire black people to work for you in your real estate business and you need to sell houses in white neighborhoods to black people if they want to buy them." You see in those days there were lots of ways that white people kept black people from living in good neighborhoods where their kids could go to good schools and they could have good jobs. It was called segregation - keeping black people and white people separate. In those days most people didn't even think it was a bad thing. The man said, "Rabbi Lieberman - if I do that, I'll go out of business. I'll lose everything" Rabbi Lieberman shrugged his shoulders and said, "You asked."

I heard that story recently from the man's daughter who is now a grownup who works for the government. She ended the story by saying that her parents went home and talked about it and then did what Rabbi Lieberman said. It was scary for them and some bad things happened like someone throwing a brick through the window of their business. But they believed what the ancient Rabbis were saying with their boat story - we are all in it together. Lots of Jewish people saw how bad things were for black people and they knew that our Torah says #Don'tBeIndifferent



So they marched and they fought to get the laws changed and it worked! I am so proud of the way Jewish people saw the problem back then and worked on fixing it.



But a sad thing has happened since the 1960's. Even though the laws have changed, a lot of things about our country really haven't changed. And while it's no longer legal to say to a Black person "you can't eat here or sit in the front of the bus." There are many ways that things aren't fair, that aren't the same for a person with brown skin as they are for a person with white skin.

Here's just one example - last year I got to meet with Northwest Neighbors helping Neighbors - a group of people who live in the neighborhoods around BHC. Mostly they are white Jewish people and Black people. The meeting happened to be just after a Black young man named Michael was killed by a police officer in a town Ferguson, MO.

At the meeting, the people in the group started talking about the news story and one of the Jewish women said, "I just don't understand why everyone is blaming the police officer and saying they are afraid of the police. When I was raising my kids, I would always tell them, 'If you're ever in trouble, find a police officer and they will help you.' If you're not doing anything wrong, why would you be afraid of the police?"

One of the Black women raised her hand and said, "In our families, we have to teach our children to be careful when they see the police because the police assume they're doing something wrong. We especially tell our sons 'don't do anything that will make the police think you're a bad guy. If you're stopped by the police, keep your hands out where they can see them. And don't run away. It is so scary to think that our kids could get arrested or even killed when they're not even doing anything wrong."

The Jewish woman was really surprised to hear what the Black woman was saying but she listened and some tears formed in her eyes. She really listened and she really heard that even when we live on the same street or eat in the same restaurant, things are not the same for people of color as they are for people whose skin is pink. And that is not ok.

A lot of things have happened in just the last two years to bring this issue to our attention - to make us aware of the water rising in our boat - in our own city and throughout our country. Rabbi Busch has given sermons and met with Mayor Rawlings-Blake. We have started a dialogue between BHC and the Open Church, which is a predominately African American Church in West

Baltimore. Members of our congregation have read the book *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving and come together to discuss it. You should read it too.

We have done some things but there is a lot more that will need to be done to address the deep inequalities in our country. Like in the 1960's a lot of us see the problem now and we want to know what to do. We see the hole in the boat - what do we do about it???

I have two very brief and inadequate answers to that. And if I've done my job this morning, you will walk out of here feeling stirred up but uncertain of what your next step should be. That is because our very first task should be to listen, trying as hard as we can do it without defensiveness, without fear, without judgment, without shame. We must listen to how we are part of an unfair system, a system that benefits us while it keeps others down. It's hard to hear that and it can make us feel uncomfortable. But it's essential. A Chasidic rabbi once overheard a conversation in an inn where he stopped for a meal. At a table next to his, a man said to his friend, "Friend, do you love me?" "Of course I do," said his friend. "How can you ask that after we've been friends so many years?" "Do you know what hurts me?" The first asked and his friend was silent. "If you don't know what hurts me," said the first, "how can you say you love me?"

If we are going to figure out how to make our country fair and just for all of its citizens we must first open our hearts to hear how it is not fair and just... yet.

How? We can join with other BHC members to read, watch, learn, and discuss. We can meet members of the Open Church and listen to their experiences in the world. (bhcjustice@baltimorehebrew.org) If we listen in a spirit of openness, in a spirit of trying to hear the needs of our neighbors without assuming we know how to fix them, I feel certain that we will see a way forward.

And in the meantime - because I know that we are a people of doing, not just listening - here's what you can DO right now:

1) Support the NAACP in their excellent work, become a member, donate. [www.naacp.org](http://www.naacp.org)

2) Support a wonderful organization in Baltimore whose board is chaired by our own BHC member Henry Kahn, the Center for Urban Families. They are doing incredible work in Baltimore giving people stuck in an unfair system the tools to work and better their lives. We're hoping to partner with them in the coming year. Details coming soon. ([www.cfuf.org](http://www.cfuf.org) or [bhcjustice@baltimorehebrew.org](mailto:bhcjustice@baltimorehebrew.org) to find out more)

3) Join me and my kids for the culmination of America's Journey for Justice in Washington DC next week. It's \$7 and 45 minutes away on the Marc Train! There will be an Interfaith Service at Washington Hebrew Congregation on Tuesday night, a demonstration Wednesday morning on Capitol Hill and opportunities to tell your legislators you want them to work toward justice and fairness for all Americans.

The great Jewish poet Emma Lazarus, whose poem the New Colossus greets boats large and small in New York's harbor at the base of the Statue of Liberty gave us these words to live by, to guide our steps in filling the holes "Until we are all free, we are none of us free."

Shana Tova u'metuka.