



## "MAY WE BE CHANGED FOR THE GOOD"

On September 19, 1963, Rabbi Morris Lieberman stood on this bima (up there, not down here) and spoke these words:

What shall a preacher speak about on Rosh Hashanah? Standing upon the threshold of a new year, to what theme shall he address himself in an attempt to fulfill the sermonic purpose of the day...? Judaism's message is comprehensive. There is no problem of human life upon which it does not have something relevant and constructive to say. But these are the High HolyDays, the most widely celebrated festivals of our religious calendar. Appropriate it is, therefore, for the preacher to speak to the questions of highest importance, to the most crucial and to the most vital issues before us. These are not hard to determine. While pressing problems abound, two; I believe, take priority over all others. One is the problem of peace and the other is the problem of race. Rabbi Lieberman went on to say that peace was clearly the greater of the two because "unless we solve this one, all the others will disappear together with humanity itself." Today I am struck by how little has changed in the intervening five decades. With the frightening possibility of a nuclear-empowered Iran very much in our consciousness as we wrestle with the implications of the new agreement that strives to prevent a terrible outcome; Israel's continually threatened existence as a small (though strong) outpost in a dangerous neighborhood, and the questions of world stability raised by the Syrian refugee crisis, it would seem as critical today to speak about peace as it did then.

But on that Rosh Hashana in 1963, Rabbi Lieberman did not speak about peace. He said instead, "The issues of peace and war lie largely in the hands of our governmental and military leaders. In the matter of race relationships, however, the patterns we establish and the influences that we generate are primary and controlling." And he went on to say that "Judaism makes but one demand - the demand of love. It says, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

This year at the end of April, I was in a Washington DC hotel when violence erupted in our city. I watched CNN with grief, as we all did. I watched on a tv in the hotel lobby where earlier I had listened to a speaker who is a child of this congregation. Wendy Sherman, the State Department's fourth-highest official, the Under-Secretary for Political Affairs grew up here at BHC. Some of you know her, I'm sure. At the seminar which is the biennial social justice conference of Reform Judaism, Undersecretary Sherman told a story about her father who lead a residential real estate firm here in Baltimore, who approached Rabbi Lieberman after one of his sermons about race. He said, "Rabbi, I want to help. What should I do?" Rabbi Lieberman told him "You can advertise open housing." In those days of segregation, both by law and by unwritten rules of society, open housing was an unheard of mixing of white and black. Mr. Sherman said, "Rabbi Lieberman - if I do that, I'll go out of business. It will be economic suicide." Rabbi Lieberman shrugged his shoulders and said, "You asked and I told you."

Wendy Sherman's parents went home and talked about it and then did what Rabbi Lieberman suggested. At the request of the

Oriole's front office, Mr. Sherman found a house for player Frank Robinson in what had been an all-white neighborhood. He went house to house encouraging the owners not to flee and when they asked why Robinson wanted to live there, Mr. Sherman told them simply, "Like you, he wants good schools for his kids, and a safe neighborhood." Making the choice to act was frightening and they did pay a high cost, including bomb threats called in to their home. But the Shermans heard what Rabbi Lieberman said in his sermon, "There is only one question - is it right in terms of the Golden Rule? Is this the way in which I would want to be treated? Is this the way of love?"

52 years ago, Rabbi Lieberman stood on this bima and gave a sermon that I considered simply reading to you, word for word, because aside from using the word Negro, there is almost nothing in it that would not apply today. Yes, a lot has changed, but it breaks my heart that so much of what was wrong with our country then has only shifted in form and appearance. Of course it is true that the laws of our land have changed. Rabbi Lieberman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and many of you who worked tirelessly in the 1960s made that happen. It is no longer legal to actively discriminate based on a person's skin color. And I honestly do not believe that most of us are racists. I don't believe that we hate, that we believe we are better because we are not brown. But as I have learned from the superb educator Debby Irving, we live in a system that elevates those with pink skin in countless ways while it simultaneously devalues those with brown.

And far more than in 1963, some of US are not white. We Jews are African American, we are Hispanic, we are Asian.

When I watched Baltimore burning on the tv in the hotel lobby, and I saw that as much as things are different, they are not what they need to be, my heart broke. Standing there in the lobby, was not the first time my heart had broken, even if it was the closest to home. My heart broke when I heard about Tamir Rice. Do you remember his name? Tamir was a twelve year old on a Cleveland playground. Someone called in to the police that a black male was sitting on a swing pointing a gun at people. The man, who called it in, said at the beginning and the end of the call that the gun "was probably fake," and that the black male was probably a juvenile. The officers who arrived on the scene shot Tamir before their car had even come to a stop and did not administer first aid after they shot him. He died the next day.

Did those officers hate Tamir Rice? I'm sure they didn't. But were they shaped by the structures of our society that tell us black people are more dangerous, more criminal? Have you ever crossed to the other side of the sidewalk as a young African American approached? Or moved your handbag to the other shoulder? Or locked your car door? My son is twelve, but I know that police officers wouldn't shoot him first and ask questions later, even if the gun he was holding was real.

And my heart broke last summer when I met with Northwest Neighbors helping Neighbors - a group organized by CHAI for people who live in the neighborhoods around BHC. Mostly

they are Jewish white people and non-Jewish Black people. The meeting happened to be just after a Black young man named Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, MO.

Although the meeting was not about that issue, the conversation came around to it. 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 speaking softly but firmly said, "In our families, we 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. Don't get an attitude. And don't wear a hoody. It is so scary to think that our kids could get arrested or even killed when they're not doing anything wrong."

The Jewish woman was really surprised to hear what her neighbor was saying but she listened and some tears formed in her eyes. My heart broke and I think hers did too. 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 who are not.

So, I have started listening - far more intentionally than I had before - and reading. My heart broke when I read about a study in which researchers sent resumes to job postings with randomly assigned white-sounding names like Emily Walsh or Brendan Baker. These resumes were 50 percent more likely to get initial callbacks than the exact same resumes with names like Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones. And the findings weren't for one occupation or industry. They applied consistently across all of them in the study, even companies that explicitly state they are an "Equal Opportunity Employer.\*"

My heart broke when I considered Michelle Alexander's assessment of our prison system in her book, *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander, the lawyer and legal scholar, writes that "The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of Apartheid," And she implicates the War on Drugs as a major cause. Alexander demonstrates that even though rates of drug use are essentially equal among whites and blacks, in some states 80-90 percent of people sent to prison for drug use are black.

In an online interview, Alexander says: Once you have been branded a criminal or felon, you are typically trapped for life. For the rest of your life you must check the box on employment applications asking the dreaded question: "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" And once you check that box, the odds are sky high that your application is going straight to the trash... Discrimination in housing against people with criminal records is also perfectly legal... Under federal law, people convicted of drug felonies are deemed ineligible even for food stamps.... And in a growing number of states, you're actually expected to pay back the costs of your imprisonment. Paying back all these fees, fines, and costs may be a condition of your probation or parole. To make matters worse, if you're one of the lucky few who actually manages to get a job following release from prison, up to 100% of your wages can be garnished to pay back all those fees, fines and court costs. One hundred percent.

<http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/10629-truthout-interviews-michelle-alexander-on-the-irrational-race-bias-of-the-criminal-justice-and-prison-systems>

My nephew's white friend in Howard County was picked up for driving drunk. He was 18 years old. My nephew says his white friend also smokes pot. And far from now having a conviction on his record, the police brought him home. And gave him a warning.

When I saw Baltimore burning my heart broke. And when I heard about the deaths of Tamir Rice and Michael Brown and Freddie Grey. And when Dylann Roof shot and killed 9 African Americans who were studying Bible together and declared "You rape our women, you are taking over our country, you have to go." My heart broke again.

A student once asked his Rebbe "In the part of Shema we call V'ahavta we say 'Set these words, which I command you this day upon your heart. Rebbe, why does the Torah say "place these words upon your hearts?" Why does it not tell us to place these words in our hearts?" The Rebbe answered, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we are commanded to lay them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the holy words fall in." One day, our hearts break open and the holy words fall in.

My heart is broken and some of you have told me that your hearts are broken too. And the only consolation for our broken hearts is that perhaps now the holy words will fall in - Rabbi Lieberman's holy words "Let us ask, not merely as a reaction to the unspeakable atrocity of Birmingham for which every decent citizen is in mourning." [or we might say Charleston, Ferguson, Cleveland, Baltimore]. Rabbi Lieberman said, "We need far more than a temporary, emotional response. Not only is there the sudden murder that shocks; there is the steady, slow and not too perceptible kind of killing which goes on everywhere in racial terms....There is murder in the differential of lifespan between a white person and a Negro because of the better food, the better housing, the better medical care which whites receive. Beyond the murder of the body there is the murder of the spirit and the soul in frustration, in humiliation. Our ancestors understood this. They said, "He who brings the blush of shame to his neighbor's cheek spills his blood and is his murderer." Our fellow Americans have been living in shame and in bitterness of spirit. Now it must end."

So, if our hearts are broken now and the holy words are beginning to seep in - words of Torah like v'ahavta l'reacha camocha - love your neighbor as yourself, and Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof - Justice, Justice shall you pursue, and lo tuchal l'hitaleim - you must not remain indifferent what should we do now?

Well, we have done some things - Rabbi Busch and I have spoken about racial injustice and we will continue to do that. We have started a dialogue between BHC and the Open Church, which is a predominately African American Church in West Baltimore. Some members of our congregation have read the book *Waking Up White* and come together to discuss it.

But 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 love our neighbor as ourselves and 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.

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 are three more things you can DO right now:

1) Support the NAACP in their excellent work, become a member, donate. I was blessed to walk alongside the NAACP's inspiring President, Cornell William Brooks on part of the 1000 mile Journey for Justice from Selma, Alabama to Washington DC this summer. I carried a Torah then and I hope to carry the message now - the right of every American to a fair criminal justice system, uncorrupted and unfettered access to the ballot box, sustainable jobs with a living wage, and equitable public education.

2) You can read and learn as much as you can. I'm happy to provide you with a list of books I've read and found valuable.

3) You can 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)

In June of 1964 another of this congregation's esteemed Rabbis - Murray Salzman joined his colleagues in St. Augustine, FL at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Fifteen of them were arrested and they wrote a letter on the back of a flyer reporting the bloody assaults of the Ku Klux Klan in that city. They wrote this:

We came because we could not stand silently by our brother's blood. We had done that too many times before... We came in the hope that the God of us all would accept our small involvement as partial atonement for the many things we wish we had done before and often.

We shall not forget the people with whom we drove, prayed, marched, slept, ate, demonstrated and were arrested. How little we know of these people and their struggle. What we have learned has changed us and our attitudes."

In this New Year, let us learn of our neighbors' struggles. Let us break open our hearts so that holy words may fall in. And may we

be changed for the good. Amen.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah - may you have a meaningful fast.