The Trouble with Celebrating the Civil Rights Movement

Rosh Hashanah 5780 Rabbi Barry H. Block

Rosh Hashanah has many names. Among them is *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, as we recall our sins and prepare to repent. The sequence of this High Holy Day season has taught us well that we must acknowledge our wrongdoing before we can wipe the slate clean. So let me begin today's sermon by sharing a memory:

Joanne Bland remembers being only about four or five years old when her grandmother began dragging her to meetings. African Americans in Selma, Alabama were preparing to fight for their "freedom." Joanne thought all those grown-ups were "just plain dumb." "Everybody knew," she said, "that Abraham Lincoln freed us 100 years earlier!"

Not long thereafter, Joanne peered through the window at the lunch counter of Carter's Drug Store. Joanne pleaded with her grandmother to enjoy a treat at the counter. "You can sit there," her grandmother replied, "when you get your freedom."

If that door was to be open to Joanne, the Civil Rights Movement was necessary. Our nation was required to go to battle to bring an end to segregation and legal discrimination on the basis of race, and finally to fulfill the Fifteenth Amendment's century-old promise of Black Americans' right to vote.

Joanne Bland was arrested at age eight for the "crime" of praying on the courthouse steps that her parents might be allowed to vote. She was a teen by the time she tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday and on Turnaround Tuesday, then finally for the successful march to Montgomery on March 21, 1965, a key milestone leading to the adoption of the Voting Rights Act, signed into law by President Johnson on August 6 of that year.[i]

I met Ms. Bland last month in Selma. Now in her late 60s, she continues to crusade for Civil Rights. Yes, she celebrates the achievements of 1965 and is justly proud of her role in those events. Like us, she is grateful that the Civil Rights Movement was successful. At the same time, she knows that freedom is incomplete, more than a half century after the Civil Rights Movement, just as it was 100 years after the Civil War.

We Jews know something about incomplete freedom. The Passover Seder was established by rabbis who had been exiled from the land they called home, and was celebrated for nearly two millennia by Jews who were more often than not persecuted, expelled, rounded up, and murdered. Little wonder that the Seder ritual

includes opening the door for Elijah. That element of the Seder may be its most important, even if it requires explanation today.

At the end of his life, the biblical prophet Elijah does not die but is carried into heaven on a fiery chariot. The rabbis imagine that Elijah remains there until God will dispatch him back to Earth to herald the coming of messianic redemption. The Seder, therefore, paradoxically both celebrates our freedom from Egyptian bondage and acknowledges that freedom remains only a partially-fulfilled promise.

Just as one cannot open the door to Elijah without recognizing that redemption is incomplete, America cannot get to work on the next phase of racial justice without confessing that that, even after past victories, more work must be done. We mustn't be like preschool-aged Joanne Bland, imagining that Lincoln had brought all the "freedom" she needed. We must not permit ourselves to celebrate the Civil Rights Movement without examining the work yet to be done, considering the inequalities, even threats, that people of color face in America today.

Schools are desegregated, but racial disparity persists. A 2019 report by EdBuild, "a nonprofit that focuses on education funding," found that "School districts where the majority … are students of color receive $23 billion less in education funding than predominantly white school districts, despite serving the same number of students."[ii]

These days, African Americans may serve on juries, but "The United States Sentencing Commission reported [that data compiled for 2010-2016 showed] that black male offenders received sentences on average 19.1 percent longer than similarly situated white offenders."[iii]

The hard-won Voting Rights Act is undermined in much of the nation. The cruelest irony was in Alabama, home to the Freedom March that spurred President Johnson's urgency in securing the Voting Rights Act. In 2015, Alabama almost simultaneously enacted voter identification laws and closed the very driver's license offices where people needed to obtain the required identification. The closures were primarily in rural areas with predominantly black populations. "A federal investigation found that the closings caused 'a disparate and adverse impact on the basis of race.' Alabama [then] reopened the offices and agreed to increase hours in several majority-black counties."[iv] This part of the story ended well, but not before a struggle. If we celebrated the Voting Rights Act without remaining vigilant, Black Americans would remain disenfranchised.

I urge everybody to search online for a YouTube video entitled, "Dear Child—When Black Parents Have To Give 'The Talk.'" No, it's not "that" talk;

it's one that white parents like me do not have to give. The video is heartbreaking. It begins: "Dear child, the reason we have to have this talk is because you are a black child in America." Often tearful, parents go on to instruct their children how to avoid being shot by police, including the tragic acknowledgement that even following their advice to the letter "may not work at all." That's "the talk" for black parents and children in America in 2019. We'll share the link to the video with this sermon in Wednesday's e-Newsletter.

Today and tomorrow mark the 100th anniversary of the Elaine Massacre in Phillips County. More than 200 African American men, women, and children were brutally murdered. Their "crime?" Black World War I veterans had the audacity to organize in an attempt to secure a fair price for the cotton they grew as sharecroppers, slavery by another name.[v]

Yesterday in Helena, a memorial was dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Elaine Massacre. Although the occasion was the centennial, not the advent of Rosh Hashanah, that dedication was fitting preparation for our *Yom HaZikaron*, our Day of Remembrance.

We need more days of remembrance.

In Montgomery, Alabama, the Equal Justice Institute has erected a memorial to lynching victims. The open-air hall is filled with hanging monuments, each with the name a county and the names of every identified victim of lynching there. Next to the memorial is a "Monument Park" with "duplicate monuments for each county … where a racial terror lynching occurred. The Equal Justice Initiative is inviting counties across the country to claim their monument and erect it within the county…"[vi]

We in Arkansas rightly honor the Little Rock Nine, whose sacrificial bravery blazed the path to southern school desegregation. At Congregation B'nai Israel, we are justly proud of the Civil Rights activism of Rabbi Sanders, of blessed memory, and of the many women of this congregation who were leaders in the Women's Emergency Committee, whose work was indispensable to reopening Little Rock's high schools, desegregated.

I wonder how the conversation might change if we memorialized slavery, convict leasing, lynching, and Jim Crow alongside our celebration of desegregation. We may even have to acknowledge that not every member of this congregation was a Civil Rights hero. What if each of us examined our own lives, our own hearts, and our own family histories, recognized the bias within, and resolved to make our own personal repair and reconciliation? We might open the door to a better future worthy even of Elijah.

What if every county in this state were to "claim" its lynching memorial, marking massacres as Phillips County has now done? We might reckon with our history. We may open the door to frank conversations about injustices that persist even today. Opening that door would be worthy of Elijah's notice. Senator Joyce Elliott assures me that an effort is underway to claim the Pulaski County monument, and I have told her and Mayor Scott that I am eager to help. I didn't say I was making that offer on behalf of our congregation, but I am confident that I could.

Let us remember the wrongdoing in Arkansas' and America's past. Let us pay attention to injustices that persist today. Let us open the door to our own souls, committing ourselves to work required even today to further the progress of the Civil Rights Movement. Then, together, may we open the door to Elijah, to a better American future for every man, woman, and child.

Amen.

---

[i] Joanne Bland, speaking to the Central Conference of American Rabbis, "Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation: A Pre-High Holy Day Seminar in Montgomery and Selma, Alabama," August 20, 2019.

[ii] Lauren Camera, "White Students Get More K-12 Funding than Students of Color: Report," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 26, 2019.

[iii] "Sentencing Commission Finds Black Men Receive Longer Sentences Than White Men for the Same Crime," Equal Justice Institute, November 20, 2017.

[iv] Maggie Astor, "Seven Ways Alabama Has Made It Harder to Vote," The New York *Times*, June 23, 2018.

[v] Francine Uenuma, "The Massacre of Black Sharecroppers That Led the Supreme Court to Curb the Racial Disparities of the Justice System," *SMITHSONIAN.COM*, August 2, 2018.

[vi] Sign at The National Memorial to Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama.