

R. Wright
Rosh Hashanah 5775 Oration
Temple Solel

Marching for Reform Judaism in the Twenty-First Century

The people of Selma, Alabama thought he resembled Santa Claus. They wondered, “Who is this old and white bearded man?” “Is he one of those Yankee troublemakers?” “And what does this Jew want in our community?” The people of Selma, Alabama were speaking about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. After all, Heschel did look like Santa Claus; he was old and white bearded. He was Jewish. He was a Yankee. And he certainly was a “troublemaker.”

It was March 1965 – a period that saw the genesis of the hippie movement in New York and in Berkeley, California, the rise of a British quartet rock band named after an insect, second wave feminism, the space race, and the explosion of innovation in the arts and in the sciences. America was changing for the good. Yet, the majority of southerners did not welcome an America booming with such ingenuity and counter-culture. Rather, they brutally enforced a legal system that oppressed black Americans and other Americans who were not white and Protestant.

For Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, southern oppression was simply unconscionable. [See], Heschel was no stranger to state-sponsored persecution. In 1938, when Heschel was just 38 years old, the Gestapo deported him and his family to Poland. He would luckily survive, but the Nazis murdered his three sisters and his mother. He soon immigrated to the United States where he flourished as a professor of ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. He was now safe from oppression. He lived in the vibrant and progressive cultural center in the world. He was teaching, writing, and spent countless hours reflecting about God and the mysteries of life while walking in Manhattan’s green parks.

So why would he then head to Selma, Alabama? Why would he leave his comfortable lifestyle in New York? Why would he embark to a place that rejects change and discourse – a place fueled by hatred and racism, and a place certainly not welcome for Jews? For Heschel, it was his duty to head to Selma, Alabama in March 1965. It was his duty to march on the infamous Edmund Pettis Bridge hand-in-hand with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights leaders in order to fight for voting rights for black Americans. And it was his duty as a Jew to march. And as Heschel marched, the Ku Klux Klan and other bigots jeered and spat at him, just as the Nazis did to him roughly thirty years earlier. But Heschel kept marching and said, “It is important not only to protest evil, but to be seen protesting. Words must be followed by deeds.”¹

Heschel’s march on the Edmund Pettis Bridge greatly inspired us as Reform Jews. Since then, we have marched for women’s equality, civil rights for gays and lesbians, stem cell research, and care of the environment. As Reform Jews, we march to change the world. We march to repair the world. It’s what we do. It’s what our tradition calls upon us to do. We march.

Even a recent article in the *New York Times* noted Reform Judaism’s long tradition of social justice and activism.² However, and here is where I take exception; the same *New York*

¹ See Richard Michelson, *As Good as Anybody: Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Amazing March Toward Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

² See Sharon Otterman, “A Rabbi’s Departure Manifests a Challenge for Jews in America,” *The New York Times* 15 Aug 2014. For more on this article and American Reform Judaism and social justice, see Jonathan S. Tobin, “The Future of Liberal Jewry in a Nutshell,” *Commentary Magazine* 15 August 2014.

R. Wright
Rosh Hashanah 5775 Oration
Temple Solel

Times article hinted that we are a movement identified *only* by our commitment to social justice. I strongly disagree that this is the current state of American Reform Judaism. Are we really a movement only committed to social justice and activism? Are we really a movement that does not seek to create a genuine Jewish community inside the sacred halls of our synagogues? Are we really a movement that does not embody God and spirituality? Are we really a movement not devoted to the study of Torah and Jewish literature? And are we a movement that does not explore the richness of our traditions? *I believe we are.*

And this leads me to what I want to share with you on this New Year. Having just been ordained in May, and as I enter the rabbinate and join you here at Temple Solel, I would like to speak with you about what I believe as a Reform Jew, and about what I hope I can bring to you at Temple Solel.

Like Rabbi Heschel, I hope to be part of a Reform Judaism that marches in turbulent times, now in the *twenty-first* century – a Reform Judaism that continues to march for social justice, and that also marches to create genuine Jewish communities inside our sacred walls, that marches for God and spirituality, the devotion to the study of Torah and Jewish literature, and that marches for the exploration of the richness of our traditions. As Reform Jews we must march. *But we must march in many areas.*

Let's be honest here. We throw the word "community" around often in synagogues. But when we say "community," especially a genuine Jewish community, what do we really mean? A genuine Jewish community seeks relationships with all people, regardless of status or role. As the Jerusalem Talmud informs us, "He who pays respect to his fellow person it is as though one pays respects to the [Divine] Presence."³ A genuine Jewish community empathizes and always inquires by knowing the personal stories of all our members.

I enjoyed watching the television show *Cheers*. I loved the show because it embodied a genuine community. Sam, Cliff, Norm, Carla, Woody and Frasier went to *Cheers* daily because the bar was a second home. *Cheers* was a place where "everyone knew your name." *Cheers* was a place where people came to inquire and to empathize about other people's lives. Or as *Avot deRebbe Natan* teaches us, "When a person receives another person with a cheerful acknowledgment, even if the person gives the other nothing, Scripture credits the first as though they had given the other all the best gifts in the world."⁴

A genuine Jewish community assists members in need or, especially, when not needed. A genuine Jewish community puts the needs of others over their personal desires. A genuine Jewish community marches to become a *mikra'ei kodesh*⁵ - a holy community in which the Israelites celebrated each other's presence through the joys of life. As your new assistant rabbi, I strive to learn your personal stories. I want to know your passions. I want to know what drives you. I will march for your *mikra'ei kodesh*, your holy community here at Temple Solel.

The Jerusalem Talmud teaches us "There is no mediator between God's children and God."⁶ There is no conduit between God and us. We are all prophets. As a Reform Jew and a new rabbi, I have a passion for theology and spirituality. At Temple Solel, I want to talk about a God who is present in our lives, or even a God that seems absent when we are in times of need. Let us talk about a God who is metaphysical, or a God who affirms divine

³ Cf. J. Er 5:1, 22a.

⁴ See ARN 13

⁵ See Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 816. Fox renders *mikra'ei kodesh* as "proclamations of holiness," "holy convocations," or "sacred gatherings."

⁶ JT Berakhot 9:1

R. Wright
Rosh Hashanah 5775 Oration
Temple Solel

participation in the evolving world.⁷ Or even a God who is omnipresent; a God who is incorporeal; or even a God we cannot know. I want to hear your personal theologies and know how your spirituality infuses your Jewish lives. I want to march with each of you in order to learn how God remains present or even absent in your lives.

As your new assistant rabbi, I will continue to march for your Jewish learning. I will march for your study of Torah and Jewish sacred literature. The depth of Jewish literature, whether the Torah, Rabbinic Literature, [Codes], Jewish Philosophy, Modern Jewish Thought, or Hebrew Poetry, and Jewish History embodies a living Judaism. As your assistant rabbi, I will march to make the classroom at Temple Solel a sacred place for your learning, a place for your intellectual curiosities, a safe place to explore one's sense of spirituality and a place to build the kind of relationship that continues to care about and for others. The Talmud teaches me, "He who studies but does not repeat his lessons is as one who plants but does not enjoy the fruit."⁸

The Talmud reminds us, "Customs are more powerful than laws."⁹ Judaism is so rich in tradition. We are a diverse religion that embodies various cultures, customs, foods, languages, shared histories, and with a shared ancestral land, the State of Israel. And we are a religion in which our sacred liturgy connects us to the links of thousands of years of our tradition. As your new assistant rabbi, I will march for your exploration of the richness of Jewish customs, rituals, and prayers. I will march so that your pursuit of ritual and prayer elevates your lives as Jews. When we engage in a Jewish ritual or recite our sacred liturgy, we connect with our past generations. We utter the same supplications and benedictions of generations past and adopt their dreams and hopes.

Four years ago, I met a woman named Joanne Bland. Joanne was tough, but very passionate and loyal. She experienced many hardships in life. She told me that the recent housing crash destroyed her hometown. Businesses left. Homes were vacant. The depression nearly wiped out all life from the community. However, despite such visible and frequent calamities, Joanne endeavored to repair her community. And, once she fixed her community, she, like us, endeavored to repair the world. She, too, is a marcher.

We were in Selma, Alabama. I could still feel the presence of Jim Crow and southern oppression. Joanne guided a group of Jewish high school students from Los Angeles and me toward a large, haunting grey structure, above a river. It was the Edmund Pettis Bridge. She then told us that forty-seven years ago, she marched with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in order to fight for voting rights for black Americans. Police beat her. The Ku Klux Klan and bigots jeered and spat at her. But she kept on marching. She kept on fighting. Joanne instructed us to march. We linked our arms together, walked across the Edmund Pettis Bridge, and made a commitment to stand up against injustices that encumber both our Jewish and greater communities. We became marchers that day and carried with us the memory of Rabbi Heschel, Dr. King, and others.

Rabbi Heschel's story profoundly inspired me as a rabbi. I learned that when Heschel fled from Europe to America, he briefly served as a professor at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. I read an old story about the relationships that Heschel developed at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati – not with his colleagues or his students, but with the College's custodians. Biographers mention it as a way of describing Rabbi Heschel's

⁷ Cf. Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 222.

⁸ BT Sanhedrin 90

⁹ BT Yevamot 61a

R. Wright

Rosh Hashanah 5775 Oration

Temple Solel

difficulty integrating into the College at the time; but perhaps Rabbi Heschel pursued meaningful relationships with the custodians because he lived up to his own words, “Humility is not a virtue; humility is truth.” In other words, Heschel marched to create genuine relationships with everyone, regardless of status or role. He marched for God and spirituality. He marched for the study of Torah and Jewish literature. He marched for the exploration of Jewish rituals. And he marched to repair the world.

As Joanne Bland did for us, I invite you to march with me. I hope that, together, we can follow in the footsteps of Rabbi Heschel and of our people before us, as we carve out the path for those who will follow us.

L’shanah tovah