

January 12, 2018/25th Tevet, 5778

Dear KHN community,

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” This quote by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday and service to our country will be commemorated this Monday, and at KHN on Sunday for Mitzvah Day, is speaking to me more than ever, nearly 50 years after his assassination. We should not be silent that our president espouses racist ideas and supports white supremacy and patriarchal and discriminatory practices. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with King, said, *“Racism is humanity’s gravest threat to humanity - the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason.”*

As Jewish people who have experienced being vilified, unwanted, kicked out and murdered based on being part of a despised group; as a people whose foundational narrative focuses on coming out of slavery and having a God who stands for justice, we cannot be silent in the face of racism. This is not about political parties, or conservative or liberal politics. There are voices across the political spectrum opposing our president’s and his administration’s discriminatory and racist views. (For example, see Alan J. Steinberg’s view - <https://www.insidernj.com/njgop-incumbent-congressional-candidates-must-...>) This is about treating others with dignity and respect. There are millions of Americans who support the president’s racist views. As parents and grandparents, this is a difficult time to explain to young people about the bullying and hatred coming from the upper echelons of our government.

Those of us in Thursday Torah study recently read about a debate from rabbinic literature. Our Sages of the first two centuries wondered: What is the most important principle of the Torah? Rabbi Akiba argued that it is the precept of “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). Akiba’s student, Ben Azzai, had another opinion: “You must not say: ‘Since I have been put to shame, let my neighbor also be put to shame, for if you do so, know that you are shaming someone who is made in the likeness of God.’”

Rabbi Michael Leo Samuel put it this way: *“If you cannot respect the Divine image that you are made in, the odds are that you will not be able to respect the Divine image in others. Even if one were shamed, such disparaging treatment does not entitle the victim to reciprocate in kind—not even in the face of provocation. To insult or harm the divine image in any of its forms is to deny the essential brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind. This is why Ben Azzai felt that the verse affirming the Divine image is by far the most comprehensive principle of the entire Torah—the bedrock of all biblical morality.”* (<http://rabbimichaelsamuel.com/2009/10/rabbi-akiba-and-ben-azzai's-famous-debate/>)

For many of us, we must stretch and see our president and all those who support white supremacy as made in the divine image as well. We can and must speak up for values we believe in, as well as counter and stand up against hate, even as we remember the people saying these vile sentiments must be treated as full human beings. This is our challenge as we approach MLK Day: let us remember the world we want to live in, and fight for it, and shine our energies into it. As King said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

I look forward to seeing you this evening at 7:30 and Sunday for Mitzvah Day.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Diana

***I would like to remind you that I am available to speak and meet with you. I have found that setting individual times with people rather than having specific office hours has worked wonderfully these past few years. My email is: rabbidianamiller@gmail.com and my phone number is: [215-804-6626](tel:215-804-6626).