

*Friday, August 19th, 2014*  
Shabbat Shalom!

It was 45 years ago today that the most iconic music festival began. In the summer of 1969 in upstate NY Woodstock would begin. 32 bands- billed as "An Aquarian Exposition: 3 Days of Peace & Music". 80,000 people were expected; 400,000 showed up to Max Yasgur's farm in the Catskills. 400,000 people mostly peaceful, sliding in the mud, walking barefoot, tripping on acid, became part of one of the most iconic moments of the 1960's and as Rolling Stone magazine said, one of the 50 most important moments that changed Rock n' Roll. Those seemed like more care-free days. When we could gather, and listen to music for hours on end.

But in truth that counterculture experience was just that -counter-the -culture of a violent war in Vietnam and a Cold War that cast a dark shadow over most of the world. Not really much different in 45 years. During our time too-a dangerous virus of terrorism wracks the Middle East from Gaza to Syria to Iraq in the guise of ISIS and Hamas. Relations are colder than ever between the US and Russia.

And in our own country we watch helplessly as St. Louis, Mo erupts night after night in violent protest of a seemingly excessive use of force against a young black man. Race relations in this country haven't moved very far from the late 60's until now in many places in our country.

Tonight on this Shabbat it is good to take a look at our assumptions about race and color. We all need to be reminded that color of our skin must not be the filter of the way we treat others. Inside we are all the same color.

It was 50 years ago this summer that Freedom Riders came south to help register black voters. And 50 years ago this year that a group of rabbis were arrested in St. Augustine Florida, protesting on behalf of black Americans. One of those Rabbi Richard Levy, one of my teachers will be speaking at Kol Ami later this fall about that experience and his role in the civil rights movement.

But now as we Jews are in the sacred time of looking toward the New Year, these are the weeks we begin the process of examining our lives, our strengths and our weaknesses. We try to learn from the past to build a new future in a new year. This same process is good not only for people but for institutions.

It's not surprising to me that as Anti-Semitism rears its ugly head that racism is infecting our country. For they go hand in hand. Anyone who is perceived as other—Jews, Blacks, Latinos, immigrants by the society at large is often subject to discrimination. The problem here is that it is institutionalized. And so you have an entire police force in Ferguson, Mo. That clearly is ill equipped spiritually and emotionally to understand the symbolism of a mostly all white police force policing a majority African American community. We here in Los Angeles learned this too the hard way.

The riots and revolt in 1991 as part of the Rodney King case, changed the way the LAPD did policing. First the finding of the Christopher Commission urged serious changes in policing. This was followed by another report 5 years later that reviewed some of the changes including a new police chief at the time and noted a reduction in crime and use of excessive force. Yet it acknowledged that there were still within the LAPD problems around race and gender. The Rampart Corruption Case put the LAPD over the edge.

And finally, "after a series of lengthy negotiations, the City of Los Angeles and the U.S. Department of Justice agreed to enter into a consent decree on November 3, 2000, which allowed for federal oversight of the L.A.P.D. reform process for a period of five years. In exchange, the Justice Department, which had been investigating the L.A.P.D. since 1996 for excessive force violations, agreed not to pursue a threatened lawsuit against the city." (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/lapd/late/decre.html>) The Rampart case is often referred to as the worst police scandal in modern U.S. history. It involved the investigation of 70 to 100 LAPD officers following reports of widespread corruption within an anti-gang unit in the department in the late 1990s.

"Terms of the Decree were negotiated between the city and the DOJ, and included emphasis on management and supervisory measures to promote civil rights integrity, integrity audits, community outreach and other training.

In July 2009, U.S. District Judge Gary Feess granted the joint request of the United States and the City of Los Angeles to terminate the Decree." (<http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2013/05/16/civil-rights-consent-decree-over-lapd-lifted-after-almost-...>; This changed the culture of the LAPD and the way in which policing is done here in Los Angeles.

Now the Sheriff's Department is under similar investigation.

And certainly it seems the Ferguson, Mo. Police department should be under similar investigation.

It is time to learn from the past. And time for not only the people of St. Louis, Missouri to demand an examination of the way the police do business in their neighborhoods but it is all of our responsibilities to hold our police accountable.

Not all police are problem. Not all deputies are racists. Not all cops are on an ego trip. To the contrary our Sheriff's department here in West Hollywood trains the deputies that serve here in all kinds of sensitivity training and diversity training.

But citizen oversight of police goes hand in hand with demanding police be trained to de-escalate situations, not through use of force but through other means and tactics.

Perhaps Mike Brown would still be alive if the Ferguson, Mo police force had been trained that way.

I wish sometimes we could return to the carefree-music filled summer of Woodstock; when we didn't have to worry so much about race riots, anti-semitism and war in Israel and the Middle- East. I wish the summer could be care-free and easy. But at least for now, let us take a few deep breaths, and drink in the Shabbat that comes to whisk away to eternal time and space. Shabbat Shalom