

## Reflections on Our Civil Rights Tour through the Deep South

Parashat Tetzaveh 5784

Rabbi Michael Safra, B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville MD

Having grown up in Atlanta, I felt a certain amount of pride in bringing a group from the synagogue on a Civil Rights tour in Georgia and Alabama a couple weeks ago. Our guide, Billy Planer, was my unit head at Camp Ramah and the youth director at my synagogue when I was in high school; and there were loads of other personal connections. I spent the night at my parents', woke up in the morning and took the Marta down to Atlanta airport to meet the other 45 members of our group. It was all very exciting. But the feelings of pride and familiarity did not last long. This was not supposed to be a "feel good" trip.

We traveled about fifteen minutes up I-85 to Auburn Avenue, site of the King Center, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King are buried. Sitting in a little amphitheater between the original Ebenezer Baptist Church where "Daddy King" preached and the new Ebenezer where Senator Raphael Warnock pastors, Billy told us the story of Auburn Avenue. The area was once called Sweet Auburn because it was a center for business and commerce in the Black community. The neighborhood was home to many middle and upper-middle class Blacks. And then they built the highway and the neighborhood declined. For many years it was a neighborhood "people like us" avoided.

I let that sink in. I had traveled I-85 many times before. Atlanta's highway system is very good, much better than what we have in the DMV. But I had never really considered how my convenience – and my ability to bypass the once-thriving businesses I hardly knew existed – negatively impacted others. I realized I had so much to learn.

Looking back today, it is easy to lose sight of just how difficult the work of the Civil Rights movement was. We remember Dr. King's triumphant speech at the March for Jobs and Freedom. Every time I mention it, someone tells me with great pride that they were there. And we forget the challenges. Even the speech itself. ... When King began with his prepared remarks, the reaction was somewhat muted. People were hot and tired and they had heard enough speeches. It was only after King heard the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson shout from the front row, "Tell him about the dream, Martin!" that he launched into the extemporaneous "I have a dream" rhetoric we remember.

Earlier in 1963, King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference was struggling. King came to Birmingham and was met by Blacks *and* Whites telling him not to come. *We don't need you here*, they said.

Similarly in Selma in 1965. .... Neither the SCLC nor the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee wanted to get involved in Selma. They believed Selma was just too backward. It was only after a group of committed college students marched anyway and were brutally repelled on Bloody Sunday that King got involved invited clergy from the north to come down. We remember

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel – or as some Blacks lovingly referred to him, "Rabbi Santa Claus" – marching arm-in-arm with Dr. King. But we forget just how courageous his position was. Heschel didn't have a lot of friends at the Seminary then. Leadership didn't necessarily support his social activism.

We remember Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and 56. But we lose sight of all the organizing behind it. Leaders had to pick the right person; they believed Rosa Parks's lighter skin tone would lend more sympathy to their cause. After she was arrested, leaders had only four days to spread the word and begin the strike; and this was before social media! They had to arrange carpools, skirt unjust laws, and maintain compliance for 381 days from people who needed the buses. It was far certain that this boycott would succeed.

The Civil Rights movement succeeded in dismantling Jim Crow and pushing passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, but it did not succeed in its larger mission to end racism. On the last day of our trip, we visited the Legacy Museum, which chronicles America's story from enslavement to mass incarceration. As the museum tells it, the subjugation of Black people that began with the 17<sup>th</sup>-century slave trade never really ended. Emancipation led to Jim Crow. Literacy tests were replaced by more subtle attempts to discourage voting. Lynching evolved into tough-on-crime policies that disproportionately impacted Black and Brown communities. Inequities persist in our justice system. Regardless of our political persuasions, we must recognize that the Torah's commandment, "justice, justice you shall pursue," has yet to be realized. None of this is easy.

The Jewish role in the Civil Rights movement is also more complicated. From our first orientation, we were constantly reminded that this is not "*our* story." We love to quote Rabbi Heschel, that on the day he walked across the Edmund Pettis Bridge, he felt as though his feet were praying. My colleagues remember how Dr. King attended the Rabbinical Assembly convention in March 1968, just days before he was assassinated. We take pride; but it's not "*our story*."

Some Jews were surprised when the movie "Selma" came out that Rabbi Heschel was not included in the picture of Dr. King crossing the bridge. Same with the picture in the National Museum of African American History and Culture. ... People asked: *what happened to Rabbi Heschel? Why is he not in the picture?* It turns out that the march organizers understood that lots of people would want to be seen next to Dr. King, so they arranged that people would take turns marching in the front row. The picture we know is not the only picture that was taken that day! It's not "*our story*."

Many Jews stood with the Civil Rights movement, but not all Jews. We visited Temple Beth El, the Conservative synagogue in Birmingham. Our hosts from the synagogue couldn't have been nicer; and they were honest. We all want to claim our place on the right side of history, but in reality, their synagogue, like everyone else, was divided. Some wanted nothing to do with Civil Rights. Some preferred a gradualist approach. And others favored more aggressive advocacy. My group learned about a Jewish lawyer (I believe his name was Jacobson) who took heroic stands in his law practice and supported progressive integrationist values at home. But in 1963, he also wrote to Dr. King to urge him not to come to Birmingham. This lawyer considered himself a

champion of justice, but King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" put him on the wrong side of history. It is complicated. The binary: *which side were you on?* is insufficient.

And then there is everything that happened since October 7. We saw the vile statements from the Chicago and LA chapters of Black Lives Matter in support of Hamas. About a week ago, the historically Black African Methodist Episcopal Church called for an end of US Aid to Israel. As I reminded my Black pastor friends who visited B'nai Israel on Wednesday, Jews are rightly offended by these kinds of statements. But injustice still exists in this country, and it is very real. Interfaith fellowship, personal relationships are still important and meaningful and worthwhile. History suggests that strategically, we cannot aspire to be "a nation that dwells alone." Relationships are complicated. We can never skirt disagreements or set aside critical aspects of our identity for the sake of "partnership." But that doesn't negate the import of the work.

It is difficult to draw direct connections between Parashat Tetzaveh, our trip to the South, and the Civil Rights movement. But there is an interesting comment from Rabbi Harold Kusher in *Etz Hayim*, ironically on a verse fraught with meaning for both the Jewish and African American faith experiences. We read as a conclusion to the description of the priestly vestments, “ ושכנתי בתוך בני ישראל, I shall dwell among the Israelites and I will be their God; and they will know that I am Adonai their God who brought them out of the Land of Egypt that I might abide among them. I am Adonai their God.” The traveling sanctuary was to be a symbol of the responsibility born on the other side of slavery to repair and improve our imperfect world.

The comment from Rabbi Kushner cites a strange question from the Talmud, tractate Zevahim: “If a priest's body is inside the Tent but his head remains outside, is he considered having entered the Tent and may he perform the service? The answer is that he may not; he must be totally within.” Rabbi Kushner continues: “A person can be physically present at a service but emotionally and spiritually absent. One's head may be elsewhere. Such a person is not considered a true participant.”

And so it is with our mandate to repair the world. That's what I draw from this comment. We cannot walk away from injustice. If we are not willing to engage, if we are unwilling to insert ourselves, if we do not confront the tough questions, we cannot fulfill our sacred obligations.

Having received that message, I went back to tractate Zevahim to read the actual text. And it turns out that *Etz Hayim* only cites half the original teaching. When performing "*kodashim*, the sacred ritual," the priest must have his body completely within the Temple courtyard. But there is another detail. Rituals called "*kodshei kodashim*, the most sacred order" must be performed in the northern section of the Temple courtyard; and if a person stands in the south and reaches his into the north to slaughter the animal, his service is valid. If the priest inserts his head and most of his body into the north, it is as if his entire body entered the north.

There are two different standards for two types of service. I read into this a recognition that we live in multiple worlds. We live in our Jewish, particularistic world, and we live in the broader universalist world. We have obligations in both places. To truly make a difference, we must be

present; we can't engage from the sidelines. But there are moments – and this post-October 7 moment is one of them – when crisis demands that even if our hands are in another space, our bodies are needed here. We are clearly called in this moment to connect with Israel and support Israel and advocate for Israel as it prosecutes a very difficult war. But that need not mean we must remove ourselves from our sacred mission of *tikkun olam*, which remains pressing.

That's why we went to Georgia and Alabama – to walk a sacred historical path, to understand the complexities of an era, and to reaffirm that even as so many great things were accomplished, there is still more work to do. *Lo alekha ham'lakha ligmor*, It is not our duty to complete the task, but neither are we free to remove ourselves from it. Shabbat shalom.