

Rabbi Peter W. Stein
Shabbat Shlach Lcha 5780
Temple B'rith Kodesh
June 19, 2020

On this date, June 19, 1865, 155 years ago exactly, the Union troops arrived in Galveston, Texas. Led by Major General Gordon Granger, they had an important mission...to deliver General Order Number 3.

"The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired laborer."

This event has been commemorated, especially in the black community, as the holiday of Juneteenth: the war was over and the slaves were free. While this year, many observances have been restricted because of the pandemic, it is a day filled with historic and cultural significance.

For a moment, though, remember one element of what was announced. The Emancipation Proclamation had been issued 2 ½ years earlier. The importance of the June 19 action, though, was that Texas—and many other places—had resisted this change until the war was concluded. The statement that “slaves are free” was not new, but it was finally coming to fruition.

The next part of the statement, then, warrants our consideration as well... “absolute equality of rights [between black and white Americans...]”

We know that as we sit here, 155 years later, that there is a much longer lag between the formal proclamation and reality. There is still an urgent fight for equality in so many ways.

100 years after the end of the Civil War, the momentous events of the Civil Rights movements were unfolding. 100 years exactly after the end of the War, in 1965, from March to August, we witnessed the span of events from Bloody Sunday to the signing of the Voting Rights Act.

And now, another 55 years later, brave Americans are still extending themselves to combat violence and hatred. There is still so much to do!

This is where we live: in the gap between words and reality, in the tragic space between reality and the world as it should be.

Our Torah portion for this week gives us a helpful charge, one of the classic examples of optimism and faith. We are reading *Shlach Lcha*, from the book of Numbers, where Moses sends a group of scouts into the Promised Land to see what they see and bring back a report.

The majority of the scouts bring back a frightful report, that while the land is certainly beautiful, that they encountered dangerous giants, and that there would be no way for the Israelites to successfully settle in the land. Specifically their report is that “we encountered the giants and saw ourselves as [if we were] grasshoppers.”

The perspective is critical: they saw themselves as grasshoppers...surely, they did too.” When they looked at themselves, they felt inadequate.

The other two scouts, Joshua and Caleb, bring a different point of view. They don’t contradict the report about the beauty of the land and they don’t even make mention of the mysterious giants. Rather, they simply proclaim, “The land that we have traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land...that flows with milk and honey...Have no fear then of the people of the country...because God is with us. Have no fear!”

The perspective is the essential part of the report: instead of comparing ourselves to the other, Joshua and Caleb challenge us to see ourselves for ourselves...we need not fear because we have everything we need. We can overcome anything that stands in our way.

When we consider the arc of the last century and a half, the gulf between proclamation and reality, we need to be honest about the urgent needs but also we need to affirm that we have everything we need to answer those needs.

The end of the Civil War included the statement that not only would the slaves be free, but that there would be equality. We still need to make this a reality. We can do this by learning and acting together.

We can do this by asking questions, and using the answers to guide our actions.

Who are our neighbors? Literally our neighbors that live in nearby houses and also those we interact with at work, clubs and activities, in shops and restaurants, and in other parts of our lives. For most of us, this will be a relatively homogenous group...let's ask why this is.

I can tell you that I have had the experience of dining with black friends in some of the Jewish community's favorite restaurants, and receiving all sorts of ignorant and hurtful comments. Polite racism is still racism, and is harmful.

Most of us are aware of some of the unfortunate history in Rochester, of restrictions being written into housing codes and so on. While those formalities have thankfully largely gone away, there is still a tragic gap between words and actions, and the reality of segregation perseveres.

I know that many of us have had the experience of being viewed and treated differently than black customers when we enter or exit a store. I'm waved through at the exit while the black family's bags are checked. Unofficial racism is still racism, and is harmful and unacceptable.

As Joshua and Caleb urge us to see, we have it within our power to make changes in the community. We have the ability to create a new community that is not dominated by dramatic divides between the zip codes...divides by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other markers.

There is another aspect to what we can do, each and every one of us. We are in election season, and it is up to each individual who is eligible to vote for those we believe will create liberty and justice for all: to vote for equality, opportunity, safety, and prosperity.

So many of us have been deeply distressed over these last several weeks, and have been in search for concrete actions. We heard inspiring ideas when we hosted Rev. Jackson. Our Social Action committee and other members have been engaged in different coalitions and involved in vigorous consideration of different community actions.

Each one of us charts the path that is the right and appropriate action for us. There's not one set of actions that's right for all. For all of us, though, I would urge that now is the time to ask one question...one simple word...WHY?

Why is it that there is such a dramatic gap between words and actions? Historically, we recognize the bloody gap between the Emancipation Proclamation and freedom. We acknowledge the bloody gap that endures between freedom and equality.

It is up to us to bridge that gap and to work toward true equality and genuine opportunity. Let us ask why that vast gulf persists, and what we can do to bring it, and all of us, closer together as one nation.

This week, we reached the five year anniversary of the profane violence at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston. 9 people gunned down during Bible study. I will lift up their names as we prepare to say Kaddish later in the service.

For now, though, I mention them for one particular reason. Let us remember them as our brothers and sisters. We must not rest when hatred and prejudice leads to bloodshed.

Let us see what binds us together with the victims of racism, not rest and keep them at a distance. Let us resolve to end a world of violence and discrimination. Let us take action to create a world of peace, equality, and opportunity.

Tonight, I pray, our words will be followed by actions, and we will move to close the gap that keeps us away from the world as it should be.

Shabbat Shalom!