

RACISM
YOM KIPPUR 5777
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

On Rosh Hashana, I said that the theme I am emphasizing these High Holy Days is the need for us to LISTEN to one another. One of the real problems in our society right now is that we are not hearing each other. We tend to stay in our own neighborhoods with people who look like us and think like us. We have isolated ourselves in silos, surrounding ourselves, online and off, only with people who share our perspective. We unfriend or stop following people when we don't like their statements on Twitter and Facebook. So we are missing at least half the story of our community.

Attorney Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, says:
"When we get close, we hear things that can't be heard from afar. We see things that can't be seen. And sometimes, that makes the difference between acting justly and unjustly...
If you are not proximate, you can't change the world."

Which is why I want to tell you the story of Laura Schroff, a white middle class sales executive who moved out of her comfort zone to encounter a world she had never imagined. One evening, on her way home from a busy day at work in Manhattan, a skinny, bedraggled eleven-year-old African-American boy stopped her in the street, asking for spare change. He had such sad eyes that she knew he was hungry. At first she walked away. "His words [were] part of the clatter," she says, "like a car horn or someone yelling for a cab."¹ But then she came back. Rather than giving the boy some money, she took him to lunch. And she continued to meet with him, again and again. She and Maurice met up for dinner nearly every week over many years, building an unexpected, life-changing friendship, that has spanned almost three decades.²

Schroff recounts this unusual story in a recent book called, *An Invisible Thread*. By the time Schroff met Maurice, she had succeeded in business, living in a nicely furnished apartment with a closet filled with designer clothes. Maurice lived in one room, in a squalid welfare hotel, along with his family which included his mother, his grandmother, his two sisters, his aunt and her two young children, and six uncles who came and went -- at times there were as many

¹ *A Thin Thread*, p. 1.

² <http://books.simonandschuster.com/An-Invisible-Thread/Laura-Schroff/9781451648973>

as 12 people living in that one room. All of these adults were involved in drugs, using and or selling. Maurice's mother was a heroin and crack addict who turned tricks to pay for her habit. To protect herself, his grandmother carried a sharp razor she called "Betsy."

Schroff describes going to this welfare hotel for the first time:

"The main elevator with a crudely painted black door covered with scrawled graffiti, did not work. [A] guard took us...

to the freight elevator...[which] rattled up to the fifth floor.

The hallway was dark and dreary: no carpet, crumbling plaster walls, scattered trash...The baseboards were black with soot..."³

The room Maurice's family occupied "was about twelve square feet, with two windows and a high ceiling. Toward the back there were two single beds with no sheets or pillows. There was a beat-up, beige La-Z Boy chair and a half-sized refrigerator with a small TV balanced on top. Schroff recounts that, "Maurice would later tell me the fridge never – not once – had any food in it.

All he ever found there were a plastic jug of water and a box of baking soda used for cooking drugs...The five young children slept in the single beds at night while the adults stayed up and did drugs. When morning came, the children got up and the adults crashed and slept all day."⁴

Amazingly, from such an unpromising background, Maurice did not follow in his family's footsteps.

"Today, Maurice is 41 years old. He is not in jail or on drugs or dead," Schroff says. "He is a father and a husband, with a beautiful wife and seven lovely children. He works in construction and he is the first man in his family to ever earn a paycheck or a college credit. And now, all of his children have remarkable dreams of their own. Against all odds, a generations-long cycle of destitution, drugs and violence has been broken."⁵

Credit for that can be attributed to a number of factors.

First of all, Maurice was an unusual child...

Secondly, his grandmother Rose decided to do what she could to keep him away from drugs. And of course,

his relationship with Laura Schroff was transformative -- for both of them. As Schroff says: "In the time we spent together I tried to encourage him to imagine a different future for himself—to dream of a life of possibilities...At the same time, Maurice gave me one of the greatest gifts I've ever received.

³ Pp. 52-53.

⁴ Pp. 64-65

⁵ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/may/11/laura-schroff-invisible-thread/?page=all>

⁵ Pp. 17-8.

He taught me to be grateful for what I had. He showed me there are great hidden blessings in our lives, if only we open our minds and our hearts to the world around us. He taught me how one small act of kindness can change a life.”⁶ Maurice became the son she always wanted but never had. And their relationship allowed her to confront the alcoholism and abuse that occurred in her own family.

I offer this story because, as author Chris Gardner has written, it "shows us what's possible when we are not afraid to connect with another human being and tap into our compassion. It is a story about the power each of us has to elevate someone else's life and how our own life is enriched in the process. This special book reminds us that damaging cycles can be broken and [reminds us] not to neglect the humanity of the strangers we brush up against every day.”⁷

Today, we read from The Holiness Code in Leviticus. The primary emphasis is on the ethical. These laws demand that we treat the elderly, the disabled and the poor in a humane and respectful way. The stranger, in particular, is to be treated justly. Leviticus tells us: “And when strangers dwell with you, you shall not wrong them. The stranger who dwells with you shall be like the citizen among you; and you shall love that person as yourself.” So what does it mean to treat the stranger respectfully? Doesn't it mean recognizing their dignity, and being open to hearing and validating their story?

Panhandlers, the homeless, those living in the ghettos of the inner city are the strangers in our midst. How many of us have actually spoken to a homeless person – aside from angels like Lori Rich and those of you who have served meals at the nearby churches and at Hulen? How many of us have met the Maurices of our city and gotten to know their humanity, the struggles they are up against, their hopes and dreams? So many of us stay away out of fear – sometimes justified of course. But what surprises are in store if we can only open our hearts.

I hope the story of Laura Schroff and Maurice does not reinforce negative stereotypes about Black families. Rather, it illustrates the circumstances under which so many of our Black children are growing up, how few opportunities they are afforded, how many obstacles they are up against. Too often, we label them as bad people, as “those” people.

⁶ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/may/11/laura-schroff-invisible-thread/?page=all>

⁷ bestselling author of *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Start Where You Are* (on Amazon web site)

We assume that whatever happens to them is their own fault. We avoid their neighborhoods, we send them to jail and prison. We put them out of our minds rather than actually listening to their story and acknowledging their pain. We might be astonished – even horrified -- to learn about the challenges facing Black men and boys in our society.

Reverend Jeffrey Brown, a Black Baptist minister, was awakened to this reality in Boston where the homicide rate had surged. He preached about it and offered after school programming, but this made no difference. Finally, he and other members of the clergy did something unusual: rather than preach, they decided to LISTEN. They spent time hanging out in the worst, most dangerous, gang and drug-infested neighborhoods, late at night, talking to the young folks who were responsible for the violence in the city, building relationships with them. Rev. Brown discovered that the stereotypes of these kids were all wrong. These kids were not cold and heartless people; most of them were just trying to survive the streets. Brown says he actually met some of the most intelligent, creative, magnificent and wise people. Together, they developed a plan to reduce violence on the streets. And violence was reduced by 79%. Reverend Brown explains that these young men were the victims of “decades of failed housing policies, and poor educational structures, persistent unemployment and underemployment, and poor health care. And throw into the mix drugs and guns.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates, who writes for *The Atlantic* magazine, believes that this is the deliberate result of racist policies that provide advantages to white people that are not offered to their Black counterparts. He describes the neighborhood where he grew up in his searing book, *Between the World and Me*. “To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The nakedness is not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear. The law did not protect us...a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can only protect you with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or has succeeded at something much darker.”⁸ For Coates, the body of a Black person is vulnerable to violence -- the violence of the police that too often targets Black men and the violence of the streets in his own neighborhood

⁸ Pp. 17-8.

where fear is turned to rage.

Whether deliberate or not, racism is still a factor in our society. The disparities in our criminal justice system attest to that reality, which is why the Reform movement has taken on racial justice as its main issue for the next year or more.

The Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis have both passed resolutions in support of racial justice.

The URJ's Resolution on the Crisis of Racial and Structural Inequality in the United States reads in part:⁹

“Even as we reaffirm our respect and appreciation for law enforcement, we must acknowledge the long-standing structural injustices, particularly concerning race, that plague too much of our society including our criminal justice system. In Deuteronomy (16:20) we are commanded, *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, "Justice, justice you shall pursue." The sages explained that the word *tzedek* is repeated not only for emphasis but to teach us that in our pursuit of justice, our means must be as just as our ends...

The recent cases in cities across the United States involving the questionable use of deadly force by police dramatize the ongoing challenges...

We mourn the deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and all who have had their lives cut tragically short under similar circumstances.

While these cases differ, common threads run through them: economic, social, and racial disparities that deny opportunities to individuals of color and erode families and communities;

the violence plaguing too many low income and communities of color;

the violence faced daily by law enforcement, leading some police to view too many in communities of color with suspicion and even hostility; and the disparate treatment that grand juries and prosecutors too often give to police versus civilian crime suspects.

Systemic change is needed urgently...If we are to thrive as a nation, all people must have equality of opportunity and be able to have faith and trust in law enforcement and our judicial system.”

The Unetaneh Tokef asks: “Who shall live and who shall die?”

How much longer must we wonder: “Who by gunshot or who in prison?” when it comes to people of color.

A small step in the direction of rectifying our criminal justice system is a non-partisan effort, supported by Reform California, part of our movement, to pass Proposition 57.

This ballot measure would mandate that a judge, rather than a prosecutor, make the decision to try a juvenile as an adult. It would also give non-violent offenders time off

⁹ <http://www.rac.org/racial-justice-and-jewish-values#sthash.43wEAYIs.dpuf>

for participating in educational and other rehabilitation programs. According to Governor Jerry Brown who is behind this proposition, 80 percent of these prisoners are African-American and Latino. Their initial brief sentences have been enhanced to last for decades. Proposition 57 would give them a chance to mend their ways rather than spend years behind bars, hopeless, and ripe for recruitment by prison gangs. There are flyers in the foyer if you would like more information. Please give serious consideration to a measure that would afford these people the opportunity for teshuvah.

The Torah reminds us 36 times to care for the stranger. That's because it is not a natural response. We feel uncomfortable around people whose lives are so different from our own. It takes courage, compassion, and humility to reach across lines of race, religion and gender. But if our society is indeed going to thrive, rather than be torn apart, it is imperative that we open our hearts to one another. Let's follow the example of Laura Schroff. Next time, let's stop to talk to a stranger begging for our attention. We might discover a whole new reality out there.

Following this service, at 2 PM, Professor Martin Japtok, author of *Growing Up Ethnic*, will speak with us about the connection between racial justice and Judaism. Please join us.