

## **Martin Luther King Weekend talk by Rabbi Mordechai Liebling 2022**

(Delivered at Shabbat Services, January 15, 2022)

Shabbat Shalom, thank you for inviting me, I wish that we were in person even so it is a true pleasure to be with you.

In today's parsha we celebrate crossing the Red Sea, so it seems appropriate to begin with these words of Dr King from 1967, the last speech that he gave to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

“And so we still have a long, long way to go before we reach the promised land of freedom. Yes, we have left the dusty soils of Egypt, and we have crossed a Red Sea that had for years been hardened by a long and piercing winter of massive resistance, but before we reach the majestic shores of the promised land, there will still be gigantic mountains of opposition ahead and prodigious hilltops of injustice. We still need some Paul Revere of conscience to alert every hamlet and every village of America that revolution is still at hand. Yes, we need a chart; we need a compass; indeed, we need some North Star to guide us into a future shrouded with impenetrable uncertainties.”

More than 50 years later we still haven't reached that promised land, we still need to alert everyone to the need for revolution

I know that you as a congregation have spent considerable time and effort on racism and that ALAN EPTSEIN is leading a study group on the subject. I hope that I am able to add to your understanding

Today I will focus on the why of the need to be engaged in anti-racist work on the personal, communal and societal levels.

If I am going to talk about it on the personal level I thought it appropriate to start with why is this important to me.

As some of you know. My parents were both Holocaust survivors, each the only surviving member of their respective families. I grew up knowing the effects of extreme racism. My grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were all murdered by people who believed Jews were other, an inferior race.

My parents were then refugees in this country, we lived for the first ten years of my life in the 1950's in Brownsville in Brooklyn – classified at the time as the most rapidly deteriorating neighborhood in New York- I still remember the fires. We moved out when the landlord sold the building, we were the last white family to leave the block. I saw first hand the effect of what I later learned was redlining.

Then, living in East Flatbush, I went to Erasmus Hall High school and our perennial rival for the basketball championship of Brooklyn was Boys High, an all black, boys only school in Bedford-Stuyvesant, at the time a dense, very poor all black neighborhood- what used to be called the ghetto. During my senior year on an afternoon in- February of 1965 – a month before the march and bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama- about dozen or so of my friends and I decided to go to the Erasmus Basketball game at Boys High.

it was a close, tense game in a densely packed gym of hundreds of students, chanting and clapping, it felt like the floor and walls were undulating. We were the only white spectators and sitting at the furthest point from the exit. Our predominantly black team won in the final minute.

The crowd was angry. By the time my friends and I got to the exit we were walking single file with our hands on each other's shoulders, I had the misfortune of being last in line. When we got out into the street all I could hear was people chanting, "kill whitey" I was terrified. I was pushed down into the street, lying in fetal position, being kicked and punched, tasting my own blood, while people continued to chant kill whitey.

Suddenly, two black young men reached down, each one grabbing an arm, they began lifting me up- and shouting, “don’t kill him”; as they were carrying me others reached in to punch me- those two fought them off and got me out of their safely. They saved my life- they risked their own safety, possibly their lives, to save me. (angels)

Over time it was easier to understand people getting caught up in the violence of a crowd, than to understand two Black young men risking their lives to save an unknown white guy. Though it certainly took me quite a while to sort it all out, I was the target of the rage the black community feels because of oppression, and I received the grace of being saved by two people able to step outside of the black-white dynamic and act in a fully human way. I think this and my family background helps explain my commitment and long term involvement with this issue.

Though my story may be more dramatic than others, each of us who “presents as white” needs to look within and search why it is important to us to do this work. It is not easy work, we need to be able to hang in there in tough moments, being rooted in our motivation is important. When we know the why we can access our passion.

Currently I am on staff at POWER Interfaith an affiliate of Faith in Action, formerly PICO, it is similar to GBIO here in Boston. Our Executive Director is black as is about half of the staff of 28. Working through the racial dynamics is an ongoing challenge. One necessary condition of being able to do it is knowing that everyone is committed to do the work, that no one is just going to get up and leave. That commitment to be in the uncomfortable place is essential.

In general, white people, especially those with economic privilege, have expectations of being comfortable. The prevailing social norm is being nice. Niceness has the effect of preserving the status quo, which is a culture of white supremacy. Challenging norms leads to discomfort, and change requires us to be uncomfortable.

I have heard from people of color that those moments of discomfort are hard for them, too. For centuries making a white person uncomfortable could lead to serious consequences, even death, and now the experience of many is that those uncomfortable moments don't lead to any real change. The commitment to hang in there, to stay the table is essential to doing the work. Thus, knowing our motivation, why it is important to us, is inner work we each need to do.

A note of clarification, as I am using the term white supremacy it includes the multitude of ways our society elevates white people as the human ideal and norm for humanity and relegates everyone else as a particular kind of human, and always a lesser deviation from the white ideal. As when we consistently mark the race of everyone who is not white, while not naming our own. This in addition to all of the policies, political, economic, social or otherwise that ensure the power and advantage of white people over all others.

Our personal identities are not separate from the white supremacist society that we were raised in and our patterns of cross racial engagement are not merely the product of our unique personalities.

Just as everyone needs to examine how sexism or patriarchy has shaped their identities and behavior, we need to examine how white supremacy has shaped them.

Ibrim X. Kendi, wrote "I maybe not a producer of racist ideas, but I am a consumer" we are all consumers of racism just by living in America.

White people can easily get defensive in conversations about racism

We hear it as a moral critique of ourselves, rather than people of color just reporting on their experience.

Jay Smooth – hip hop DJ, and social commentator wrote "think of being a good person" as "you would think of being a clean person.... something you maintain and work on every day... when

someone suggests that we've got something stuck in our teeth we don't say, "what do you mean, I have something stuck in my teeth? I'm a clean person!"

"You will never bat a thousand when dealing with race issues," says Smooth. "The problem with that all-or-nothing binary, is that it causes us to look at racism and prejudice...akin to having tonsils – you either have tonsils or you don't – ...and if someone says "I think you may have a little unconscious prejudice" – you say, 'no, my prejudice was removed in 2015'!" Yet "many things in our day-to-day lives...cause us to build up little pockets of prejudice every day, just like plaque develops on our teeth. So we need to move away from the tonsils paradigm of race discourse, toward the dental hygiene paradigm of race discourse."

Smooth counsels: "shift away from taking it as an indictment of our goodness, and move towards taking it as a gesture of respect and an act of kindness, when someone tells us that we've got something racist stuck in our teeth."

Robin DiAngelo, in her latest book *Nice Racism* has a useful insight about the difference between guilt and shame.

DiAngelo observes that white progressives readily express shame about racism but hesitate to express guilt ; she hypothesizes that feelings of shame can serve as an excuse our racism, it even can provide social capital. Saying, "Oh I am such a bad person" is shame, it is socially legitimate to express it in liberal circles and one then doesn't don't have to take responsibility. When we express shame we get support and are reminded of our goodness by others. Guilt means an action that we took and requires taking responsibility.

- The psychologist Joseph Burgo posits that Shame relates to self and guilt to others, guilt is about doing bad, shame is about being bad. Guilt is about external actions it is public, Shame is about internal actions -- it is private.

Shame puts the focus on ourselves and not those who have been harmed. Shame tends to be paralyzing.

Feminist theoreticians bell hooks and Audre Lorde note that feeling bad about racism or white privilege can function as a form of self centeredness . Hooks considered shame to be the performance of whiteness and not an indicator that it was being interrupted. Expressing we are ashamed shows that we meant well, that we are not racist.

Sara Ahmed teaches that a white person that is shamed by whiteness is also a white person that is proud about their shame-. The very claim to feel bad about this or that involves a self-perception of being good. If I feel bad enough I both demonstrate and retain my morality. I know that I have experienced that, sometimes in a moment when I become aware of some privilege that I have, and then feel bad about it, I have the thought well at least I feel bad about it, so I must be a good person.

Feeling guilt can be a normal healthy response to harm that we have caused, it doesn't need to be experienced as a moral blemish. We can make the necessary reparation and move on. In Judaism we know the steps of tshuva.

Guilt, though, has its limits and rabbit holes. I prefer to think in terms of ethical accountability. I was raised in a society that infused me with messages and behavioral models of white supremacy, which I believe are wrong, thus I have an ethical obligation to do my best to not act in accordance with those messages. It is not my fault that I have racist thoughts, but it is my obligation to examine how they affect my behavior.

I learned the basic lesson from feminism, I was raised in a sexist- male supremacist society, I need to examine how hidden assumptions may be influencing my behavior- especially because I benefit from it. I've been learning about sexism for over 50 years now and I'm still learning. That learning of course has taken place in the context of close, trusting relationships with women. I never had and never will have the equivalent amount of interaction with people of color. Some of that learning, also, came from being in groups with other men to talk about it. To do the learning about racism takes consistent, conscious effort, and I have benefitted from being in white ally groups. I understand a white ally as someone who works with other white people to understand and change racist behavior. Ethical accountability requires that if I have

the potential to benefit from a behavior that may harm another being, I need to change that behavior. And, importantly, I love my partner, my daughters, my women friends, so I want to change my behavior so as not to harm the people I love. We can draw on Dr King's teachings about love and our own injunction to love our neighbors as part of our why to look at racism.

**We white people need to face the internalized superiority that results from being socialized in a racist society.**

The ways in which we consciously or unconsciously believe that we are more important, more valuable, more intelligent, more deserving -- than Black people. It is impossible to not get that message growing up in America.

Regardless of one's other positions in society white people know on some level that being white in this society is better than being a person of color and this along with the very real doors opened by whiteness serve to mediate the oppression we may experience in other identities that we hold. We need to reach for racial humility.

To do this work I need to ask myself questions such as. How did I as a cis gendered white man internalize racial superiority through the culture's representation of white men as the embodiment of wise leaders, or the peak of evolution? What has it meant for me to be a signifier of intelligence, of wisdom? At same time what has it meant to me as Jewish man growing up in the 50's when the prevailing images of men were of John Wayne, that I am not as strong, as powerful, as white Christian men, how have these messages set me up to collude with racism?

**Centering** the effects of growing up in a white supremacist culture does not need to lead to denying my own experience, centering racism can be a way to understand myself better.

In this country as a white person I can't fully understand my experience of being Jewish without recognizing that I am white .

Being white is not a strong identity for most white presenting Jews in fact many if not most of us resist it, even as we have benefitted from our whiteness.

Some years ago I participated in a training program and we were given the following instruction:

1. At the beginning of each new interaction with other people, say to yourself the words: "I am white."
2. Each time you interact with a white person today, think to yourself: "This is a white person." and "These are my people."

I had some resistance to the first one, but eventually saw that it gave me insights and a new perspective, **the second one I had enormous resistance to- growing up in household of survivors**, white Christian men were seen as the greatest danger to safety. I'm still working on it.

I suggest that you try something like that.

I hope this gives you some indication of the personal work that needs to be done, now turning to the communal level. Again, it is important to understand our self- interest, why a Jewish community should commit to being anti-racist. DT has done and continues to do work around racism, and that you are working on specific congregational practices to be welcoming, so I'll be brief about this. It always makes our work stronger when we are clear about the why we are doing it. Engaging in anti-racist behavior for someone else's sake will be limited and ultimately be tinged with racism.

Seven is the Jewish number of note so Here are 7 reasons being anti-racist is in the self-interest of Jewish communities. These are not in any order of importance.

1. Depending on the study 10-20% of Jews in the US self-identify as Jews of color- this includes dark skinned Sephardi Jews and that percentage is increasing; we are in fact a multiracial community.

2. Jews are historically safest in countries that proclaim equality and denounce any form of bigotry; any sanctioned discrimination or othering of a category of people creates the possibility of othering additional groups including Jews;

3. As American Jews we need to address racism because it is the core wound of American society, and we need to live in a healthier society

4. In the eyes of white nationalists Jews are the enemy, we are the most powerful threat to the American way of life, they see Jews as behind Black Lives Matter, marriage equality and illegal immigration- we are the masterminds or the puppeteers.

5. In this historical time and place the safety and security of the Jewish people is more likely when we create common cause with the broader population of other oppressed groups.

6. The Core values of the Jewish tradition, every person is created in the image of God *btzelem Elohim*, love your neighbor as yourself *vahavta reicha k'mocha*; and, and justice, justice you shall pursue *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, all require us to be anti-racist to live our values, it is how we fulfill our selves morally.

7. Our full spiritual development is limited when we are constrained by racism.

Reconstructing Judaism, has hired Rabbi Sandra Lawson a recent graduate of ours to help congregations develop policies and practices to be more welcoming to Jews of Color. You can be in touch with her

This brings us to **the societal level**. An important and powerful book that came out in the last year is *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We can Prosper Together* by Heather McGhee.

A theme of the book is how racism is used to change the perception of the public good, and her lead example is the public swimming pool. In the 1940's and early 1950's US cities built enormous public swimming pools. The one in St Louis was big enough for 10,000 people. Then the courts began ruling that it was illegal to segregate pools. The majority of cities then opted to close public swimming pools rather than integrate. Millions of Americans -- who once swam for free -- began paying to swim ONLY with whites. For example in DC after a pool desegregated in 1953, 125 new private swim clubs opened in next decade. A once public resource became a luxury amenity and entire communities lost out on benefits of public life.

Montgomery Alabama "To defy integration, closed every single public park and padlocked the doors of the community center, It even sold off the animals in the zoo. The entire public park system was closed for over a decade and even after it reopened they never rebuilt the pool."

Draining public swimming pools reached the supreme court in 1971 in *Palmer v Thompson* the court held that a city could choose not to provide a public facility rather than to provide an integrated one, because by robbing the whole public they were spreading equal harm Hugo Black wrote "There was no evidence that state action affected Negroes differently than whites."

Here is an example about education. In the 1940's and 50's Back when the public was nearly 90% white and the students who were going on to college were mostly white and, actually, mostly male, government picked up the tab, whether it was state governments funding the costs of their public colleges, or federal grants. State college tuitions were minimal.

Then government walked away from the deal around the same time that the college-going population became more diverse. And so you started to see this privatization of public colleges. So now the majority of states rely on tuition dollars for the bulk of the costs of college. And we shifted at the federal level from grants to loans. And student debt for everyone has exploded.

The narrative that white people should see the wellbeing of people of color as a threat to their own is one of the most powerful stories in America. A recent survey showed that the average white person sees racism as zero sum game if things are getting better for black people it must be at the expense of white people.

A highly respected survey from 1956 showed that nearly two thirds of white people in this country thought that the government should provide a minimum standard of living and guarantee a job, an astounding contrast to attitudes today.

And then, between 1960 and 1964, white support for these big government guarantees for everybody cratered, dropped nearly in half to 35%. And it stayed low ever since.. What caused such a dramatic shift in a few years?

What happened between '60 and '64? White Americans watched the march on Washington for jobs and freedom. They saw Black activists demanding those same kinds of economic guarantees. They heard Kennedy start to speak about civil rights and make promises. And then just a few years later Johnson signed the civil rights legislation, Suddenly government was seen by many whites on the side of Black folks.

Ronald Reagan – used this perception for his own agenda – which was to lower taxes and blunt the government’s ability to challenge concentrated wealth and corporate power – Reagan railed against welfare and the war on poverty and told white voters that the government was the enemy because it favored black and brown people over them-

The result was a revolution in American economic policy from high marginal tax rates and generous public investment in the middle class to a new policy of low taxes and low investment in public services. This new economic policy resulted in less than a 1 percent annual income growth for 90 percent of American families for 30 years and led to the largest gap in income and wages in American history.

Without the cudgel of racism we could have fiscal policies that would benefit the majority of people

The right has been able to get many white people to believe that government policies are on the side of these undeserving people of color and so support for Medicaid for all or for adequate school funding is thought of as favoring people of color.

This warping of the public good lies at the heart of many of America's ailments. People of color are hurt more acutely, but the vast majority of white people lose out as well on education, healthcare, housing and good wages. The why here is that we engage in anti-racist work to benefit the entire society. At this moment to defend democracy, the single demographic held most in common of the 700 people arrested for January 6, is that they live in counties where the number of people of color has significantly increased in the last several years. If you believe in a zero-sum game then you feel threatened.

McGhee promotes the "Solidarity Dividend," the idea that a "multi-racial coalition" can win gains for the overall public good.

She found a moving example in Maine, which has "one of the whitest and oldest populations in the country." Residents of Maine with French ancestry, "Francos," who still experience discrimination, found common cause with French-speaking African immigrants. Together they built a multinational coalition that enabled Maine to be "the first state in the nation to vote to expand Medicaid by ballot initiatives over the governor's repeated refusal." What these groups could not accomplish alone was won by fighting together.

It is in the interests of the vast majority of Americans to be anti-racist.

now having looked at why we need to do this work on the personal, communal, and societal levels I will close words of Dr King's

He ended the speech I quoted at the start this way:

I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about "Where do we go from here?" that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society

And later on that year he said:

"I am convinced that if we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. "

We still need to engage in the radical revolution of values for our own well-being, and the well-being of our community and our country.

Shabbat shalom