

Naso 5780 - Love Your Neighbor As Yourself
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For the last three years, I've had the privilege to lead our 11th and 12th graders on a Civil Rights Journey through the American South. The trip, which we've been running over Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend, is the centerpiece of a year-long seminar that explores the intersection of Judaism and Social Justice. Over the course of the year, we explore the question of what it means to look at and act in the world through the lens of Jewish values, using the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s as a case study for how that particular generation of Jews expressed their Jewish values through their participation in the fight for racial equality. Before the trip, we explore the long history of Jewish activism in America - from the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in the early 1900s to American Jewish protests of Nazi Germany in the middle of the twentieth century to the work of organizations like Jews for Racial and Economic Justice or Bend the Arc today. We look at the evolution of the Death Penalty as a major Civil Rights issue of our day, and what ancient Jewish sources have to say about these ideas.

And then we travel to the South, covering four cities in three days, by bus. We start off in Atlanta, Georgia, where students learn the story of Leo Frank, a young Jewish businessman who was found guilty of murdering a 13-year-old white girl named Mary Phagan in 1913, and, after his sentence was commuted by the governor in 1915, was dragged out of jail and lynched by an angry mob. The Frank story offers some context for understanding the widely-varying and complex responses of the Jewish community in whether or not to get involved in the Civil Rights movement in the 50s and 60s, whether their involvement in this fraught issue brought Jews unwanted negative attention, or if they felt a moral imperative to join the fight for equality.

From Atlanta, we travel to Montgomery, Alabama - for just about all of our students, it's their first time visiting Alabama. In Montgomery, we spend an intense day exploring the evolution of the Civil Rights movement from its early days at the Rosa Parks Museum, then eat lunch at an incredible restaurant run by a formerly incarcerated woman who makes a point of hiring other formerly incarcerated individuals. Then we visit the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum, housed in a former slave warehouse. This museum presents a powerful narrative linking the history of slavery to mass incarceration today. As they explain in their mission:

EJI believes that the history of racial inequality and economic injustice in the United States has created continuing challenges for all Americans, and more must be done to advance our collective goal of equal justice for all. The United States has done very little to acknowledge the legacy of slavery, lynching, and racial segregation. As a result, people of color are disproportionately marginalized, disadvantaged and mistreated. The American criminal justice system is compromised by racial disparities and unreliability

that is influenced by a presumption of guilt and dangerousness that is often assigned to people of color.¹

It's a difficult piece of our past and present to grapple with as young, mostly (though certainly not all) white, upper middle-class Jewish Americans. For some of our students, this museum begins to create a shift in their thinking, from the way they learned American history - that there was an institution called slavery, then a terrible period called Jim Crow, then Martin Luther King, Jr. and the leaders of the Civil Rights fought and won and achieved racial equality in America, end-of-story. The Legacy Museum, and really the entire trip, begins to create more nuanced gradations of how our students understand what it is to be white and what it is to be black in America. They begin to understand the subtle, deep-rooted, systemic elements of racism and inequality that are harder to discern in the deeper narrative of this history.

From the Legacy Museum, we go to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice - a monument that memorializes and honors the names of the thousands of victims of racial terror lynchings. It's the first museum of its kind - to try to acknowledge the terror that black people experienced throughout America, between 1877 and 1950. The narratives of these individuals' and families' lynchings presented at both the Legacy Museum and the Memorial force visitors to grapple with troubling stories of innocent men, women, and children who were murdered - often as public events with a celebratory nature - for crimes like talking to a white woman or walking on the wrong side of the street. As the Equal Justice Initiative explains:

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice provides a sacred space for truth-telling and reflection about racial terrorism and its legacy.

The museum and memorial are part of EJI's work to advance truth and reconciliation around race in America and to more honestly confront the legacy of slavery, lynching, and segregation. "Our nation's history of racial injustice casts a shadow across the American landscape," EJI Director Bryan Stevenson explains. "This shadow cannot be lifted until we shine the light of truth on the destructive violence that shaped our nation, traumatized people of color, and compromised our commitment to the rule of law and to equal justice."

After grappling with these enormous and challenging topics all day, we spend time reflecting as a group - often students are unsettled by thinking about American history in this way, many of them confronting the perspective of black Americans in this powerful way for the first time. We talk about what we can do with what we've learned - students talk about the ideas of advocacy, of sharing what they've learned, of the ways in which this experience has changed their thinking around issues of race and class at their schools or in their neighborhoods. It's a powerful thing to be part of this awakening and frustration with some of these darker elements of American history, but it's also inspiring to watch their resolve take shape around wanting to do something about it. And then, because it's Friday night, we visit a Reform synagogue in Montgomery and pray with the local Jewish community, singing familiar melodies and feeling bolstered by prayers

¹ <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/>

of strength, reminders of the Jewish experience of journeying from oppression to freedom, of hope in a world as we know it ought to be, despite the brokenness of the reality around us.

The next day, we spend a lot of time on a bus. We travel from Montgomery to Selma. We hold Shabbat morning services at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the site of Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965. We tour Selma, often with Joanne Bland, an incredible woman who marched across the bridge that day as a young child, along with her older sister. Joanne tells stories of life as a little girl in Selma - of segregation and fear, but also the moments of fun and celebration with her family. She talks about the excitement around planning for the march from Selma to Montgomery, and how proud she was to be a part of it. She takes our students to a slab of cracked concrete behind the Brown Chapel AME Church, where our own Rabbi Sydney Akselrad had met and prepared for actions with other Civil Rights leaders in those days. She has them pick up a stone lying on the ground. Joanne explains that this is the last piece of the original cement where the march from Selma to Montgomery began, on March 7, 1965. She's a powerful personality, full of heart and passion for education. She'll often pick one student, have them hold their rock in the air, and she'll tell them:

"This is John Lewis' rock - you know who John Lewis is, right? He's a Congressman now, yes, but back then he was the President of SNICC - the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He stood on the same rock you're holding. Look at you, holding history in your hand. YOU must be a history maker too. When you feel like you can't do anything, pick up that rock and hold it in your hand and feel the strength of the ordinary people who made history not just here in Selma, but America. And then get up off your behind and do something about it. Is that clear?"²

Joanne doesn't just tell the story of Selma in 1965. She pushes our students to really internalize the struggle, and the power they have to make change in their world.

From Selma, we travel to Birmingham, visit the Birmingham Civil Rights Museum, and meet with Bishop Calvin Woods, who was a leader in the Birmingham Civil Rights movement, and was also Martin Luther King, Jr.'s driver in Birmingham. We end the trip back in Atlanta, where we attend Sunday Morning worship services at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King, Jr.'s father and grandfather were pastors, in the neighborhood where Martin Luther King, Jr. grew up.

It's a profound trip, that I think makes a serious impact on our students. It begins to change the assumptions they have about the America they live in. As one student explained,

During the civil rights trip, I was able to see another part of America that I otherwise wouldn't have. I saw the diversity and great population of African-Americans living in Alabama and Georgia. I was able to relearn historic events from a new and important perspective, and I became inspired to use my privilege to bring about change. Speaking with Joanne and hearing her talk about her experience as a black woman in our country

² She talks about this lesson in a powerful film, *After Selma*, about the history of voter suppression and voting rights, available on Amazon Prime.

was so eye-opening to me. Realizing that the fact that I don't have to think about the privilege that I have proves to me how privileged I really am.

I'm sharing this trip with you tonight not as an advertisement for the trip, but to highlight how important it is for us - for our whole community, the entire Jewish community and our broader American community - to begin to open ourselves up to the complexities and nuances and challenges of American history, in order that we might begin to understand what the black community means when they say "Black Lives Matter." As Joanne Bland taught our students earlier this year, the challenge with a statement like "All lives matter" is that in this day and age, from her perspective, it feels like some lives matter more than others, that some lives are inaccurately perceived as a threat to others. As she said, the statement is missing a word: All lives SHOULD matter.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his powerful book *Between the World and Me*, which is an extended letter to his adolescent son, offers a powerful glimpse of what it is to be a black male in America today. In talking about the deep-rooted system of racism in America, he writes:

"To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good, or else that it's a well-considered act in conformity with natural law." This is the foundation of the Dream—its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works. There is some passing acknowledgment of the bad old days, which, by the way, were not so bad as to have any ongoing effect on our present. The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one's eyes and forgetting the work of one's hands. To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown. It is still too difficult for most Americans to do this. But that is your work. It must be, if only to preserve the sanctity of your mind."

Let us not be the ones to remain indifferent, to continue to look away. As the Union for Reform Judaism wrote today:

Our observance of Shavuot is tempered by the brutal killing of George Floyd and the ongoing racism that destroys and dehumanizes Black & Brown lives in the United States. As we stand at Sinai and renew the Covenant we are reminded that Shavuot commemorates the Revelation of a moral code that dictates how we live, and that includes anti-racism, liberation, and justice for all.

In this complex world, so full of brokenness, we must remember the imperative we're called to in the Torah, in Leviticus 19, also known as the Holiness Code: *V'ahavta l're'acha kamocho* - Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18). I've seen some communities who have added to that - not just love your neighbor as yourself, but "*V'ahavta l're'acha gam im hu lo kamocho* - Love

your neighbor even if they are not like you.” We must commit ourselves to bringing strength and hope and love and light into our world.