

D'rasha / Sermon
Bet Mishpachah
Friday, Dec. 5, 2014

Rabbi Laurie Green

It's been a rough few weeks. In all the craziness, it's easy to forget Michael Brown and Eric Garner and their families.

For the record, I like law enforcement. I have a cousin who works for Homeland Security, allegedly in Border Patrol but he's always inexplicably out of the country, so nobody really believes he's in the Border Patrol. A friend from high school works for NSA and one of our best friends in Colorado is just back from Iraq and is proud of it. I also like attorneys, and I've worked for some great politicians.

Cops are second only to teachers in being underpaid and under-appreciated public servants.

And I don't want to do this dangerous job. I'm glad other people carry guns for me.

I want my son Gus to respect law enforcement. I told him, "When you need help, run to a police officer."

I'm embarrassed to admit that it was only two weeks ago that I realized that millions of parents tell their kids NOT to run towards the police when they need help. I knew they told them not to run FROM the police, but it never occurred to me that they'd say, "If you need help, walk but DON'T RUN towards the police."

Reasonable people can disagree about what happened between Darren Wilson and Michael Brown.

There are some things we don't know:

- ◆ We don't know how many unarmed citizens are shot and killed by police each year because we don't keep official, reliable statistics.

We do know, per Nicholas Kristoff, who is not exactly a socialist:

- ◆ That the U.S. incarcerates a higher percentage of black people than did apartheid South Africa.

- ◆ That the wealth gap between the average white family and the average black family in the U.S. is higher than it was in apartheid South Africa.

We know that people are angry.

We know that everyone is just out to blame someone else, including liberals looking to blame all conservatives for every injustice in the world.

People have even blamed the St. Louis clergy — really?

I was watching CNN a couple of days after the non-indictment of Darren Wilson was announced and someone whose name I don't remember had the nerve to ask where were the clergy? That got my attention and to CNN's credit, a few minutes later they had on an African-American pastor who in that African-American preacher sort of way declared, "I was here marching all night! The clergy were here marching! But it isn't the job of the clergy to maintain law and order and it isn't the job of the clergy to bring about justice. "

A few days later, I had the opportunity to join a webinar for members of *T'ru-ah: A Rabbinic Call for Human Rights*. *T'ruah* is named for the shofar call on *Rosh ha-Shana*, e.g., *sh'varim t'ru-ah*.

On the webinar, among other people was Rabbi Susan Talve, who is the senior rabbi at Central Reform Temple in St. Louis. She's a noted leader in anti-racism work in the Jewish community & throughout the broader community. She was also named one of the Forward 50 this year — the "Forward" newspaper's 50 most influential American Jews.

Susan said, "It was all a set-up." She explained that the prosecutors, police & other elected officials knew that 7:00 PM was the planned time for all the various religious prayer services, Jewish and not, and therefore all the clergy would be in their synagogues and churches at 7:00 PM, so they couldn't be present for the announcement.

I don't know if someone decided to announce the verdict at 7:00 PM to make sure that clergy wouldn't be present for the announcement and to spark overnight riots. Maybe it was a coincidence.

I do know that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said it best: "In a free society, some are guilty but all are responsible."

But it doesn't feel like we're making progress.

True, we have a black President and gay marriage in Mississippi.

True, today's headline in the "Forward" said "Rabbis Arrested" protesting the non-indictment in Eric Garner's death.

Those rabbis were Sharon Kleinbaum of our sister LGBTQ *shul*, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST) in New York; Jill Jacobs, executive director of *T'ru-ah*; and Shai Held of *Hadar*, the mothership of the movement for independent minyanim around the country. They were joined by Randi Weingarten, head of the Teacher's Union, who the "Forward" noted is Sharon's partner.

But it FEELS helpless, and that's what I want to talk about.

Despair is the favorite weapon of evil.

I was reminded of this studying "*Me-or Eynayim*," by Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl — it's a Hassidic commentary on the Torah portion.

"*Me-or Eynayim*" reminds us that there is only one day a year when evil can't bring judgment against us: *Yom Kippur*. And there is one day a year when evil is extra

powerful: *Tisha b'Av*, the day when the Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed and many other disasters befell the Jewish people. And the rest of the year it's a constant wrestling match.

This week's *Parasha*, the weekly Torah portion, is about the wrestling match between Jacob and the *Ish* (literally "man" — we debate what he actually represents), after which Jacob is wounded and gets a new name: Israel, which means Wrestles with G-d.

Israel is us. The *Ish* is us, too. A name for the "other" within us is the "*Yetzer ha-Ra*," the Inclination to Evil.

We think of the *Yetzer ha-Ra* as luring us with sex, money and power, and it does that, too.

But its favorite weapon is hopelessness, despair, depression, helplessness — what am I to do?

It would be easy for me to preach against the injustice of the world and pat myself on the back.

You could also pat yourselves on the back for coming to *shul* and listening to my *d'rasha and noddling and posting on Facebook*.

Don't despair. Do something.

If you haven't yet, find at least 20 minutes and \$20 to do something.

Go to the *T'ru-ah* website and write and donate. Contact your elected officials. Support voter registration and voting rights. Support urban renewal and criminal justice.

I've planned to talk about this for weeks, but I wasn't sure how to end it — I even have a question mark on my notes. And then I realized that there's nothing more to say other than please turn to page 149 in our new songbooks. We conclude with the song:

Od yavo shalom aleinu v'al kol ha-olam.

Salaam. Shalom.

And peace will come to us and to the whole world.
Salaam. Shalom. Peace.