

Justice, Justice Shall you Pursue

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August 21, 2020

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof—Justice, justice shall you pursue.

These words, from this week's Torah portion, have motivated Jewish action in every generation.

This evening I'd like to share story of one individual, August Bondi, a Jewish immigrant to the United States in the mid-19th century, for whom these words became the motivating force in his life. I encountered him through an article in the Journal of the Bay Area Genealogical Society as they reported on a small marker telling his story. At this time when we are taking a new look at the monuments and statues around us, it seemed significant that the Jewish American Society for Historical Preservation had seen fit to preserve his story in this way.

Bondi was born Anshel Mendel in Austria to a Yiddish-speaking family involved in what was then radical politics; they were "small *d*" democrats. Following the failed revolution of 1848, in which they took part, they fled Europe and came to America. We have no record of Bondi receiving any further education after he came to the US at age 15, as he seems to have gone out to work immediately. With his family settling in St. Louis, Bondi took a variety of jobs, including working on a riverboat. He was shocked at the treatment of slaves, particularly during his visits to Texas, where he wrote, "In Galveston the howlings of the slaves receiving

their morning ration of cowhiding, waked me at 4 o'clock." But what really turned his life around was an experience he had when he went duck hunting with some ship captains and their families. One of the slaves, who was rowing the boat, accidentally dropped his oar, which made a noise such that the ducks were scared away. The teenage son of one of the owners, then shot the slave. Bondi yelled at the teen, but the captains turned on him, taunting him for being an abolitionist. He was shocked at this two-fold wanton cruelty. He describes this later in his life as the moment when he realized that he could not be a bystander, but that "his only option as a moral human being was to oppose slavery."

At that time the conflict over whether Kansas should be a slave or free state heated up with the passage of the Nebraska-Kansas Act allowing for an election. Bondi moved to Kansas to work for the Free State Movement. It looked like they would win the election, but on Election Day thousands of heavily armed pro-slavery "border ruffians" poured into the territory from Missouri. They took control of the polling places, stole the ballot boxes, and declared that Kansas had elected a pro-slavery legislature. Riots ensued in which Bondi was involved, and he fought in the famous Battle of Black Jack on June 2, 1856. Historians note that other Jewish immigrants were involved in this battle. Bondi remembered asking one of the other Jews in Yiddish, "Do you think we'll make it?", and his friend responding pessimistically with a Biblical verse: "*Sof Haadam Mavet,*" the end of man is death.

Fortunately, Bondi survived. He married and moved to Greeley, Kansas, where his home became a stop on the underground railroad. That was not the end of his activism. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Bondi volunteered, and a photo

of him in his Union Army uniform, Fifth Kansas Cavalry, exists in archives. His diary records his reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation: "No more Pharaohs and no more slaves." Wounded twice and once left for dead by Confederate soldiers, Bondi survived the war, attended law school, and spend his more mature years as a lawyer, judge, farmer, and local postmaster in a small town in Kansas. Though there was no local Jewish community, he maintained his ties to the Jewish community in larger towns. His daughter was married by the rabbi in Leavenworth, Kansas, and when Bondi died in 1907, the rabbi from Kansas City travelled to officiate at this funeral.

Bondi's life was interesting to me as it combined values learned from his parents with a significant event that propelled him into action. His parents had fought for democracy in Europe, they raised him to value fairness and equality, but it took Bondi's personal confrontation with cruelty among the ship captains to stir him into action.

Many of us were raised with parents who instilled in us the importance of democracy and freedom, but that may not be enough to turn us into activists. For some there is a turning point, something that has great impact on us, changing us from a mild-mannered Clark Kent into a superman for justice. Three years ago, the Muslim Ban and the turning away of refugees was such a turning point for a number of Holocaust second-generation women that I know. For others, there were other pivotal moments that changed them from bystanders into people interested in working with asylum seekers or getting training for civil disobedience. For many this summer, the revelation of the video of the death of George Floyd had an effect parallel to August Bondi's duck shooting experience.

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof. Unlike commandments that we perform if the occasion happens to arise, justice is something we must actively pursue, throwing ourselves into its quest in every generation.