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Rosh Hashanah Morning – 5776 –September, 2015

As I have shared with you, the first congregation I served after ordination was Beth Israel Congregation, in Florence, SC. I moved there in July 1995, and served there until moving to Lexington, KY in 2003. I was blessed with some amazing experiences and mentors there. Some of you met my dear friend Reverend Woodberry last summer at the beach service. In January, 2000, He and I joined several others and co-lead the march on Columbia, SC to take down the Confederate flag from a top the statehouse. It was an amazing event, and our then 7 year old daughters carried the “Justice First” banner in front of a crowd of nearly 50,000 people. Racial bigotry greeted us along the course of our march.

This was not my first time in the trenches of civil rights work. I have been involved in protests in Jerusalem. My arm made the cover of the International Jerusalem Post, as I restrained a colleague from slugging an ultra-orthodox young man who just thrown rocks at us for prying with women. I worked for an all otherwise minority law firm in Arkansas, doing all of the firm’s civil rights litigation. In High School, as a Key Club District officer, I participated in work that eventually led to the inclusion of women in traditional Male Service Organizations. This

march on Columbia, SC, though, held the greatest impact for me. We were not just a thorn in someone's side. This was not a war of letter writing and political posturing. On that day, we made a real difference. Sadly, even with the help of the NAACP, we won only a small victory. The flag came off of the dome, but ended up on a monument in front of the doorway into the statehouse. The screams heard the day of the monument's installation were, "Off the Dome and in your face." Still, it was down. That was 15 years and a lot of Justice work ago.

Then this year happened. This has been an emotional year for me. So much has happened. Never mind the blessings and challenges of relocating and finding one's way not only through a new venue, but also a whole new culture! Since we were here together last year, the world has weathered rashes of racially motivated violence in our own streets, the murder of innocent minorities, police officers, and the death of our innocence. The Supreme Court rendered decisions that changed the face of marriage, voting rights, and the death penalty. Then there is Iran, Kim Davis, and ISIS. Amongst all the news stories that challenged us there was the June 17th massacre in a Charleston church, and the eventual removal of the flag from the SC statehouse grounds. Part of me felt vindicated when this happened, but a larger part felt incredibly sad. Why did it have to take the loss of innocent lives for the state to finally do what is right. I got pulled right back into

the struggle and the ugliness of 15 years ago. I felt the conflicts of the news viscerally, and I ached.

I always hold hope that we will move forward; it is why I keep doing what I do. Knowing how painful the news is, I had to march. I went to Athens, Georgia to participate in America's Journey for Justice.

The march began in Selma, Alabama, and marked the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's march from Selma, across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, all the way to Montgomery (the state capitol). The energy from the march brought about voting rights legislation that changed the face of our polls. On this anniversary, the march was going all the way from Selma to the insteps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. The NAACP organized the and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism with over 200 Reform rabbis joined in. I marched on August 17. Rabbi Priesand marched on Labor Day. Each day divided into approximately 20 miles. The march culminates in DC on Tuesday night. The day I marched, it was supposed to rain, but it did not. With high humidity and heat, we made it through our almost 20 miles. I walked the whole journey. I didn't think I had it in me, but ... I did, and it was a major she-hecheyanu (thanksgiving) moment for me. The near 20 miles I walked meant a lot to me on a host of levels. I do not know whether my miles mattered individually, but I know that, the now almost 1000 miles of the journey has meant a lot to a lot of people.

I shared carrying a Torah scroll with the six other rabbis there that day. We all took our 3 plus mile turns carrying it. The Torah scroll began the journey in Selma and has been passed each night to the next day rabbinical crew and will be front and center at the rally on Wednesday.

Some have argued that this was a political march, and that Rabbis should not have been involved ... and should not have involved Torah in the mix. Yet, Torah tells us to pursue Righteousness: tzedek, tzedek, tirdoff. It does not instruct us to sit by and watch it debated. It does not tell us to change the world by brow beating each other into submission. We are clearly instructed to be proactive in bringing the world to a higher ethical default with each other, in concert with each other. Self righteousness may be political, but righteousness is the collaborative best answer for all of us, not an agendaed few.

Merriam Webster defines righteousness as, "Acting in accord with divine or moral law: free from guilt or sin." I get stuck on the last phrase, "Without guilt or sin." Yes, different people define sin differently, but our tradition is unambiguous: we are commanded to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Our tradition demands that this care be for their physical well being, their spiritual well being, and the well being of all things pertaining to their dignity. Our scripture teems with commands of how we are to represent God here on earth.

So, we marched. Our surviving families marched from Egypt. Our surviving families marched out of the liberated NAZI camps. Then President of the American Reform Jewish movement Maurice Eisendrath carried a Torah with Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Luther King, Jr. and thousands of others calling attention to racial disparities at law. The march accomplished legal change, but it did not change the hearts of humanity. We marched in Columbia to remove the flag.

Racism is alive and well in this country. Hate is alive and well in this country, and if you think it is reserved for only those of different colored skin, then you are not paying attention. Anti-Semitism is on the rise. Religious fundamentalism is on the rise. The rhetoric of hate is on the rise. We marched to say, "Enough!"

Herein begins our struggle for hope. Our rabbis teach us that the only way in which God can mend our world is for us to do the work. The Zohar teaches that when God created the world it was a beautiful vessel of light. In the process of creation, the vessel shattered. To put the pieces back into place, God created us, each of us as the holder of each of those pieces. Existentialist Albert Camus wrote we are all estranged from one another in the book, "L'etranger." As we return from our estrangement and exiles from each other, we rebuild the vessel ... this is what is meant by the words of our mission Tikkun Olam ... to repair and reunite the broken pieces of light in our world.

No one wants to oppress or be oppressed. It happens when we are so intent on our own possessions or plight that we forget our place in a bigger picture. It happens out of our own ignorance and fear. No one wants the world to end, and yet, every day that we diminish another's right to vote, to earn, to pursue the Constitutionally guaranteed inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness we tear apart a piece of the world. We further destroy the pieces of the broken vessel of light that need to be whole if we are to heal the world. The murder of minorities of police officers, of our innocence ... the world is in need of healing and of hope.

So we marched 1000 miles, bringing a message of consciousness across the American south all the way to the Nation's capital. We carried the American flag and we carried the Torah. We marched for education and opportunity; the rights to be equally heard and equally protected. We marched because life matters. These are not special rights; they are inalienable rights. My colleagues and I shared a journey with people who dedicated their lives to the cause of freedom and righteousness, and who joined this march to affirm their belief that this is a great country which is being led astray by those who have forgotten the scriptural and legal commands against oppression.

There was Ivan, no last name and no photos, but Ivan is a 70 year old man with a turned ankle and a cane. He walked out front every mile

from Selma all the way. He had stories and theories to share about everything under the sun, but for me, despite his disability, he walked the whole way. From him I learned that I could do more than I thought I could do.

Keshia Thomas became my new best friend ... she became all of our new best friend as she "collected Rabbis." In 1996, an 18 year old high school senior in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Keshia became a hero. The Ku Klux Klan rallied and marched in her town, and Keshia was among the protesters. A white man wearing a Confederate flag t-shirt and an SS tattoo somehow found his way into the group of protestors who chased him down and started beating him. Instinctively doing for him what he never would have done for her, Keshia threw herself on top of him and protected him from the onslaught. Why? Keshia explained, "I knew what it was like to be hurt. The many times that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me." Sometime later, while sitting in a coffee shop, a white man approached her, to thank her. He thanked her, because the man she saved was his father. Let's talk about the power of hope. Let's talk about how it overpowers the power of hate

On the journey, I met a 68 year old US veteran with dreadlocks and a sense of dignity that exuded from his every movement ... except at night, when he woke us with shrieks from what had to be flashback memories of his time in the service. He called himself "Middle

Passage," a name he adopted to honor the middle passage slaves brought across the Atlantic Ocean. He traveled more than 1,300 miles on a bus from his home in Colorado to Selma, intent on walking the distance of the march and returning to his cabin in the hills.

Since his arrival in Selma, he carried the American flag in the front row every day and almost every mile of the march. I carried it for him for three miles. He told me that I didn't have enough hair to make it look right. One of the organizers told me, "Middle Passage isn't human. He's a robot, because the rest of us can't keep up with him."

But Middle Passage was human who endured five open heart surgeries dating back to the 1980s. He marched for over 900 hundred miles, until Saturday. Carrying the flag he fought to honor, Middle Passage died of a heart attack in mid march.

A few weeks before, a reporter asked him why he was marching. This is what he said: "We've all got to work together to preserve what we have. It's a struggle. Freedom is not free."

From the Psalms, we read, "We must defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor! (72:4) From Proverbs (14:31) Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him." The prophet Isaiah tells us that God tired of our empty rituals ... the times we show up to act pious even while we ignore the

cries of those in need around us. In Exodus we are commanded to protect the widow, the orphan, and the stranger from being oppressed.

Who is the stranger? Who are these widows, orphans and strangers? Torah tells us several times, "You were strangers in the land of Egypt." Egypt was the place of oppression from where we learn every behavior of which we are to shun. Pharaoh's heart hardened. The people got rich off the oppressed backs of slavery. We are the widows, the orphans, and the strangers. The Exodus from Egypt is the defining moment of freedom for the entire western, religious world. On that day, we left the fleshpots of Egypt and took responsibility for ourselves and for each other as we traversed the wilderness. At no point were we allowed to leave anyone behind. In fact, the Amalekites are considered the most evil of people because they preyed on our weak and elderly attacking them first. One of the first great lessons we learned on the journey was that if we leave anyone behind, we all are vulnerable. Along the journey, we are not allowed to ignore the cries of those in need. The rabbis have always reminded us ... and our prayer book affirms that we are always marching out of Egypt. Our obligation is to hold each other as we make the journey following God into the wilderness.

We cannot define God. We cannot know what God thinks. But we do know, absolutely, that something beyond us is in charge of keeping the universe moving. God's way ... a system of behaviors that when honored ... heals the world and when affronted causes us to fall from each other. These "rules" against oppression are not met with punishment from an external God, they diminish us from within. Last week's Torah portion told us that when we fail to pay attention we will perish, not that God will smite us, but that we will perish. When a student fails to study he fails. When couples fail to communicate their relationship fails. Throughout history, when nations have ignored their needy, the nation has failed. Heaven and earth touch, we thrive, when we bring the power of creating miracles into each other's lives and remember that even if we gain today's advantage, there are longer term consequences for every decision we make.

So, we marched. Am I optimistic that we accomplished something? We brought awareness. We met lots of folks along the way who had really not paid attention to the growing reality of a resegregating society, for its reality had not yet touched them. I am not sure that this is a matter of optimism. If I am not optimistic, why did I go? Concerning the difference between optimism and hope, Sir Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Orthodox Rabbi of the United Kingdom, said, "Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that

the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope is an active one. It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope.” It is, absolutely a matter of hope. The prophet Zachariah taught us that we are prisoners of hope ... I am a prisoner of hope. Because we are prisoners of hope, we keep showing up.

We have always marched because we hope. We have no idea what will be tomorrow, but our hope is so strong that we will drop everything to help make a difference. Despite the fiercest of oppressions throughout history, we have never given up. Our tradition has always placed us at the vanguard spot in the march toward redemption. Our tradition calls this Tikkun Olam, an essential part of human existence built into human existence from the moment God formed us from the dust of the earth, from the first big bang, from wherever and whenever life first took its first breath.

Our lives have a purpose, to hope ... to teach hope ... to live in hope ... to work for the redemptive moment when peace reigns on earth and our dreams for wholeness are fulfilled.. We are not told to repair the whole vessel of light by ourselves, or even in our own generation. Tradition teaches that we must work on it piece by piece, and light returns only when we return to each other.

Where do we find the resources to fulfill our hopes for redemption and shalom? They are all around us ... and always have been. They include a teenage young lady who protects life ... even the life of one who might just as well have taken hers. r's body that shielded someone who would never have shielded her. They include the legs of a disabled man who stood and walked to announce to the world that everyone matters. They include rabbis who carried our sacred tradition pursuing righteousness. They include the many who greeted us and who jeered us and had to think about why we would be together doing this. They include the Officers who protected us and journeyed with us. They include the hands of a proud veteran who fought to protect freedom and marched to ensure justice. This man died carrying the flag of a country that he loved and dedicated his life to serving, even while also holding it accountable. They include the widows, the orphans, and the strangers who showed up to march alongside.

On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate creation and re-creation. Amongst the many things Torah says about humanity is that we are made in God's image, and have the power to create, recreate, and change the world no differently than can our creator. Blessed is the one who spoke and the world came into being! Blessed are we who speak to remind the world of its blessings. The most major of these

blessings is hope. We march between the mountains of curse and blessing ... between the choices of life and death. Where our steps bring blessing we bring life. Where we choose to hurt each other, we bring death to the spirit and to the beauty in our world.

So, we march. We have to march together to the source of hope and blessing. You are here on this day seeking the blessing of renewal for the year to come. Isaiah implores us not let our ritual fall empty. He exhorts us to go out of this day in celebration. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught, "If you are not a better person tomorrow than you are today, what need have you for a tomorrow?" I have hope that tomorrow will see us more whole than we see each other today. I have hope that we will stand for what we believe and choose to be blessed. This is the birthday of the world. It is our day to renew. The shofar calls us to task. We join in answering its call. Shanah tovah.