

One Rabbi's Take on the George Floyd death and the Civil Unrest Rocking our Nation

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
June 9, 2020*

At a time when we as a nation, and indeed the entire world is reeling from and striving to deal with the devastating and all-encompassing impact of the Coronavirus, something which has severely altered and changed – Our daily routine and habits, our family life, our economy, our way of life, Not to mention of course, the health and well-being of so many – Leading to an extended period of isolation, which in turn has caused heightened anxiety and stress...

As if dealing with all of this were not enough, our nation is now in the midst of civil unrest and protests, the likes of which we haven't seen in decades, as a result of the heartless murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer.

That one act was a turning point, because it was perceived not as an isolated incident, but viewed in the context of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breona Taylor, and other instances when young African Americans have had their lives taken – not by courts of law and not with the benefit of counsel or legal representation, and sometimes by the very individuals who are supposed to protect them.

This one act set off a spark, inflaming embers that had been accumulating for years, if not longer. It stirred outrage, because it was seen as symbolic of a pattern of racism, indifference, and inappropriate behavior that has been tolerated for too long.

George Floyd, like Eric Garner, pleaded for his life as a police officer exerted force on his neck. He pleaded for mercy, saying, "I can't breathe." Words that in a moment have now captured a movement and galvanized and awakened an outpouring rejecting the lethargy and lack of awareness that has allowed racism to fester in our society.

As I was davening this past week, I thought of all the times our prayers talk about breath and breathing.

We sing "*Kol Haneshama tehalal yah*" – from the Book of Psalms at the end of the introductory prayers: "Let every soul praise You God."

At the start of the shaharit service, we recite: “*Nishmat kol hai tevarech et shimcha* – The breath of all that lives praises You, Lord God.”

And in the very beginning of our morning service, every day we affirm: “*Neshama she’natata bee, tehora hee* – The soul, or the breath which you my God have given me is pure.”

So I had a heightened consciousness this past week during services of all the references in our prayers to breath and breathing – *neshama*, which is used in Hebrew to express life, living beings, and is the same as the word for soul.

After all, human life itself and the story of humanity is initiated in the creation story in the Book of Genesis when God breathes breath itself into the nostrils of Adam. With the breath of life, Adam became a living being, a human being endowed with a soul, *neshama*, breath.

Our mystics tell us that God’s Divine name, the *shem hameforash*, the name that cannot be pronounced, the essence of God’s Holy presence, is breath itself.

In light of these passages, watching the video of the life force being extinguished is deeply disturbing and distressing.

And so when people shout out and ask at demonstrations: “What’s his name?”

It is a cry to be recognized.

It reminds me of Martin Luther King’s final march in Memphis. Sanitation workers marched and carried signs and placards that proclaimed, “I am a Man.”

It is a cry for dignity, a cry of desperation. And all of us need to understand that this is what is meant when people say “Black Lives Matter.”

It is not binary. No one should feel threatened by such a slogan. No one should see it as a threat or statement that other lives don’t matter. Obviously, everyone’s life matters.

It is a desperate call and appeal to the conscience of all good people. It is a rejection of callous indifference. It is the response to too many instances when actions taken seem to assume that black people do not matter, that they are expendable, that they somehow are less worthy of basic human rights, including the right to breathe.

And I am making a distinction here. I am talking about the concept, the principle, not the organization which has made problematic anti-Semitic statements and taken anti-Israel positions. Despite this we can embrace the affirmation that every one, that all of God's children are created equally, *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

The Bible, the rabbis, our sages, our Jewish tradition attests over and over the sanctity of every human life, the equality and brotherhood of all, the value of treating all with dignity, the imperative to pursue justice.

This is why every major national and local Jewish organization, guided by these precepts recognize that Judaism compels us to speak out. It is why the organized Jewish community has been unanimous in expressing outrage at the death of George Floyd, and solidarity with those who protest injustice.

The point is – when people are in pain, we must hear their cry and feel and seek to understand their pain. We must have compassion towards those who are suffering.

When they call out and ask at marches and rallies – “What’s his name?” I am reminded of the powerful and beautiful poem by the Israeli Hebrew poet, Zelda – *Lechol ish yesh shem*: Every Person has a Name.

Frequently read at Israeli memorial ceremonies commemorating the Holocaust or fallen victims:

“Everyone has a name given to him by God and given to him by his parents....
...Given to him by the sea
and given to him by his death.”

I wrote last week to my friend, Anthony Brown, the representative of Maryland's fourth district in the US House of Representatives:

Dear Anthony,

I am sad, and just want to reach out to you. I am so upset by what happened to George Floyd and other victims of systemic racism in our country. Would love to chat and see if there is anything we can do together to turn the tide and help our country realize, in the words of our prayerbook, “We have not come into being to hate or destroy, but to praise, to labor and to love.”

Best wishes,

Your friend,

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

Here is the heartfelt note he wrote back to me:

Stuart,

Thank you for your email. I too am sad and distressed.

I often fear for my sons, but mostly my son Jonathan who we adopted as an infant. He is now 20 years old, and is a good-natured, loveable young man. He's smart, but often has difficulty expressing himself clearly. He can get frustrated, which sometimes sounds and seems confrontational. I am always concerned when he leaves the house, and I have been since he turned 16. He is 5' 11" and is a big guy. He doesn't fuss about his appearance, and nor should he need to. I fearfully imagine him being stopped by police for a not so obvious reason. That image is now horrifically overlaid by another image of a police officer with his knee on Jonathan's neck as he is lying face down on the ground.

It brings me to tears hearing George Floyd (and seeing my son Jonathan) calling for his mother as the last words of his life. I am angry and sad.

Anthony

This is a reality that most of us do not know, have not and do not experience, and do not have to deal with. But for an entire portion of our population, this IS their reality.

If we are to move forward as a society, if we are to heal the divisions that polarize and alienate us from one another, we must strive to understand the anxiety and the fear that parents of black children feel, the agony and worry that Congressman Brown so eloquently describes in his note to me.

And so if the events of the last two weeks cause us to do what we call a *din v'heshbon*, an accounting of the soul, to look inside ourselves, and to take a deep look at our society, to make honest and tough decisions, to think about what we do and consider the changes we need to make -- then we can hope that some good may come out of it.

Our nation has faced similar challenges and divisions in the past, and we have been able to prevail, persevere and rise above it. I have faith in the goodness of the American people to do the right thing.

When I went on a civil rights mission to the deep south a year ago, I witnessed the places where the struggle for civil rights was fought. I saw a memorial to the victims of lynching, and saw churches that were bombed. We have come a long way, and have made tremendous strides, but we still have a long way to go.

This is a time which calls out for leadership, leadership that will unite us, that will inspire and uplift us, that will remind us of the best that is in each of us, of the message of America and its promise of justice and equality for all.

As disturbing as the deaths of the victims across the country are, I found the incident that occurred a few days earlier in Central Park to be in its own way very disturbing as well. It was indicative of the kind of subtle racism all too prevalent in our society when a white woman called 911 and complained that a black man was attacking her. Although she was not threatened or in any danger, she had confidence that her word would be taken against the Harvard educated bird-watcher who was merely and politely asking her to leash her dog. She knew the assumption would be that she would be protected and presumed in the right -- because she was white and he was black.

It is this pentup frustration over these assumptions and presumptions of guilt because of the color of his skin that people are demonstrating against.

Demonstrating, protesting, calling people to look inward, asking for reforms, all of this is justified and what we need to do at this time.

But let us proceed with good judgment and not substitute hasty, unthought-out simplistic superficial slogans such as "Defund Police" as being a meaningful or reasonable policy response. Such platitudes should not take the place of necessary reforms. We should proceed with *sechel*, common sense and consider the long-term impact of such actions.

There is a stark contrast and difference between expressing discontent, of using our constitutional rights to protest and express grievances, and vandalism, hooliganism and looting.

Those who are rioting, looting and inciting violence are using the situation as a backdrop and pretext for theft. Lawlessness and wanton random acts of violence and destruction which amounts to little more than an excuse to steal are not protests against injustice, and have nothing to do with the underlying causes of the issues afflicting our nation and which need to be addressed.

.

Sadly, many of the businesses which were looted, burned, or destroyed are the very same businesses which serve minority communities.

And some of the objects of the violence and vandalism were places of business owned by Jews and clearly identifiable Jewish institutions. A member of our congregation had a neighborhood store that was broken into and looted. In Los Angeles synagogues were defaced with hateful graffiti, swastikas, and anti-Israel slogans. Not enough voices have been raised to call attention to and to object to these acts of hatred.

Anytime something like this occurs there will be those who will take advantage of the situation with anti-Semitic overtones, for which we must be ever vigilant. But we must not let prejudice against Jews deter us from speaking out against other injustices.

On the Sunday after the killing of George Floyd, I reached out and spoke to the pastors of the two black churches we have had as our guests at B'nai Tzedek, and subsequently shared with them the message I wrote in Wednesday's Egeret. Reverend John Jenkins of the Glen Arden Church wrote back to me:

My dear brother Rabbi Stuart,

Words cannot express my deep appreciation for your support and concern for our community! You have repeatedly demonstrated your heart of love and compassion and I am grateful beyond words.

Thank you so very much!

John

Our work is cut out for us. There is much to do. As Pirke Avot in the Talmud teaches and implores us, "You are not obligated or expected to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it." Let us each do our part.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, MD
June 9, 2020
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*