

Rabbi Sarah Hronsky
YK 5776 Who by the color of their skin, and who by the merits within!

On August 9, I ventured down the 110 Freeway with my daughter, to participate in a small interfaith gathering marking the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Watts Revolt. I had imagined that that in 50 years significant strides had been made. It broke my heart, when we exited the freeway, hearing Eden wonder aloud if she should be scared, as the houses, the shops, and the people, the area felt different, scary, and rundown. Certainly, did not look and feel like Sherman Oaks.

The area of Watts became well known on August 11, 1965 when Marquette Frye was driving his brother Ronald home. They were pulled over just outside of Watts for his potential drunk driving. While Marquette was busy with the police, Ronald walked the two blocks home, and returned with their mother. By this time a crowd of about 250 onlookers arrived. Marquette, who had been cooperative, began to resist arrest. Then, a rumor spread through the crowd that Frye's mother and possibly his pregnant girlfriend had been assaulted by the police. The ghetto conditions of Watts, the strained relationship between the police and the African American community, all combined with the hot weather ignited into an explosion. Los Angeles burned of five days, the results 34 people were dead and damage in excess of \$40 million had destroyed the local community.

Hard to believe that only five days before Marquette's incident, President Lyndon B. Johnson had signed the Voting Rights Act, and a year earlier the Civil Rights Act was signed, signs of progress, of moving in the right direction. Fifty years later, with a black President and how freely we speak of racial equality, one would think it would be different. Yet, voting rights are denied to this day, Watts remains different than Sherman Oaks, and frighteningly similar these last fourteen months we witnessed the unrest, riots, and revolts in Ferguson and Baltimore.

I want to acknowledge, while I was raised not to hate, not to treat others differently, I also grew up thinking that I had no race. Simply, I was the "normal." Raised in a place of privilege and accessibility. Yes, I am a Jew, but this is not worn all day every day on the outside of my body, and I truly do not know, nor will I ever know, what it feels like to be a person of color. Yes, 20% of Jews are individuals who identify with other races such as Latino, Black, Asian, Native Americans, Persian and more. But the majority does not.

And most certainly at TBH we have been a community welcoming of all individuals representing multiple races, faiths, gender identities, and sexual preferences. But we have also been blind. Been in denial. Turned our backs on our brothers and sisters. 50 years since Watts and what has changed?

Some will say our liturgy this day is frightening. Perhaps our ancestors understood that fear or at least powerful prayer could motivate us toward change. I ask you to read with me on page 82, "How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it; who will live and who will die; who will reach the ripeness of age, who will be taken before their time; who by fire and who by water; who by war and who by beast; who by famine and who by drought; who by earthquake and who by plague; who by strangling and who by stoning; who will rest and who will wander; who will be tranquil and who will be troubled; who will be calm

and who tormented; who will live in poverty and who in prosperity; who will be humbled and who exalted.”

Our liturgy asks, “Who in poverty and who in prosperity?” Do the ghettos in walking distance of our homes answer this tough question? And the fact remains that black Americans are still twice as likely to live in poverty as white Americans. Go back in time for only one of the reasons why. “Between 1934 and 1962, the Federal government underwrote \$120 billion in new housing, less than 2% of which went to people of color.¹” The largest investment in our infrastructure, in history up to this point, went only to whites. Who in prosperity and who in poverty, sadly the answer is clear.

(PAUSE) How many will pass from this world and how many will be born into it? We would not have the hash tag - blacklivesmatter, if black lives were not passing from this world at a faster rate than others, too many lost lives; it appears as though these lives are valued less. Did not God create each person in God’s image, each holy, each of us equal in value?

Who shall be born? I have a one year old son, for whom I have dreams, hopes and desires. I am only beginning to understand just how different these would be, should his skin been with color. Black columnist and American journalist Clarence Page writes, “My son was turning three years old...somewhere along the way he is going to turn almost overnight from someone who is perceived as cute and innocent into someone who is perceived as a menace, the most feared creature on America’s urban streets today, a young black male.” The most feared creature. Can you imagine giving birth to your most precious gift, only to know that he will grow up to be feared. Born into a world of distrust?

Who will reach ripeness of age, and who will die before their time? Do we know Tamir Rice’s story? Last November, Tamir was a 12 year old boy playing outside in Cleveland. But, Tamir had brought a BB gun with him to the park that day. A black youth with BB gun in hand prompted a phone call to 911, in which the caller stated that a boy had a gun in the park. And, the caller continued, saying I quote, “It’s probably fake, but you know what, it’s scaring me.” The caller also acknowledged that the person was “probably a juvenile.” Twice the 911 operator asked if the person was black or white. Twice it was answered, and the police were dispatched.

The responding officers raced across the park lawn, and in under five seconds stopped within about ten feet of Tamir, called out to him to put his hands up, and then shot him dead. I must wonder, would the police have paused and tried to talk with my 12 year old, reason with her, ask a question, and try to diffuse the situation? Would Tamir be here today if his skin color was white? Tamir Rice, 12 years old, will never reach the ripeness of age, and died way before his time.²

¹ Debby Irving, *Walking Up White*, p. 35.

² Sharing Tamir Rice’s story was inspired from reading “Our Story, Our mission, Our Fight” a sermon prepared for Rosh Hashanah 5776 by Rabbi Kenneth Chasen of Leo Baeck Temple.

Our texts also questions, “Who by fire?” I say, who by gunfire? Each day in our inner city streets the despair is so great, the disparity deeply felt, that innocent individuals are senselessly murdered. So many people, their names don’t even get recorded in our papers or headlines any more.

And then there is the-who by gunfire from a senseless act of outright racism and hate. On June 17, Senator and Pastor Clementa Pickney, while leading Bible study at Charleston’s Mother Emanuel AME church, was assassinated by a 21 year old white male.

Artist and poet, Tywanza Sanders was the youngest to die that day, at age 26. When the gunman pulled out his gun, Tywanza said, “You don’t have to do this. We are no harm to you.” Clearly not deterred, the gunman turned to shoot Tywanza’s Aunt, so he threw himself in front of the gun. His Aunt Susie would also be assassinated, because of the color of her skin. Who by fire? These caring committed souls engaged in Bible study, that is who.³

And, our texts questions, “Who by strangling? “I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe.” These words uttered eleven times over by an unarmed Eric Garner, a black man from Staten Island and a father of six. Upon questioning police authority, he was restrained, face pressed down into the concrete of the sidewalk, and he called out time and again, “I can’t breathe.” He was tragically killed by the illegal chokehold used to restrain him.

And, Sandra Bland, her story while different than Eric’s, is not so different. She was a 28 year old black woman passing through Waller County, Texas last July, where she failed to use her signal while changing lanes. Something most of us have done one time or another, but Sandra was pulled over. The police officer approached her car, asked her to put out her cigarette, and she simply questioned why. This prompted the officer to order her out of the car, and then as she was slow to respond he began to yank her out of the car. She cried out, “Don’t touch me.” He threatened to taze her, so she got out of the car. Sandra was handcuffed and led to jail.

While detained, Sandra called a friend while and left a voicemail it said, “I am still at a loss for words, honestly about this whole process. How this switching lanes with no signal turned into all of this, I don’t even know.” Three days after her arrest, she was found dead in her cell, death by asphyxiation, by strangulation. Most say that she died by her own hand, an awful act of suicide, but we should say why was she in jail to begin with? Why was she in such a desperate place? Had her skin not been black, would she have simply received a ticket, and be alive today?

This sermon is not meant to be a rant against our police, who day in and day out put their lives on the line for us. It is however to awaken us, to really listen to the stories in the news, and the countless countless others that don’t make the news. To see Watts as I is today, 50 years later and much too much the same.

³ Tywanza Sanders information drawn from “Shalom Aleichem Tywanza, Sandra, Shira and Khaleel” Rabbi Zoe Klein, Temple Isaiah, Rosh Hashana II, 5776

So, I return once again to our text, who by war and who by beast? When I think about war, my immediate response is to think safety. Is America going to be ok, is Israel ok, are we secure from terrorist threats? What I fail to imagine is what if that terror, that feeling of being at war were my everyday existence? What if? Can you imagine warning your teenage children before they leave the house at night, not the simple text me when you get there or don't forget a jacket, but rather, like many parents of color cautioning your children, "Keep their hands in plain sight if a police officer is near, do everything you can to avoid being pulled over, and avoid white neighborhoods in order to avoid being questioned for simply being there."⁴

About war our Talmud teaches, "Because of delays of judgment, perverting judgment, corrupting judgment...war, plundering, plague and famine come upon us."⁵ Even our great rabbis of old understood that with justice delayed, justice denied, justice perverted, rage will ensue, pent up anger explode, bringing war, plundering, and plague. Exemplified by the Watt's Revolts, the revolts just over a year ago in Ferguson following the shooting of Michael Brown, and to the unrest this past April in Baltimore, over the death of 25 year old Freddie Gray, who died from the injuries sustained during his arrest. The protests, the rage, the fires, the hurled stones... this is a deep expression of pain, a loud cry out for justice, for equality and for advancement

And as our text says for the coming year, "Who will be tranquil and who will be troubled? Who will be calm and who tormented?" We must not sit tranquil and calm! Rather we must be troubled. We have a collective moral responsibility to bring about justice and equality.

This is exactly what our Reform Movement has literally been striding towards these last many days. Just like in the days of MLK and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching for civil rights, this last two months saw Reform Rabbis praying with their feet, studying with people of color, and sharing the message loud and strong. Marching side by side, with the NAACP, for 40 days, physically carrying a Torah from Selma to Washington, D.C.

Along the journey, Reverend Dr. Francys Johnson, President of the Georgia State NAACP, called out to a group of black men sitting on their porch, "Come join us! We are marching for your jobs and your rights. Why just sit there?" To white men and women stuck in traffic because of the march he cried out, "We're marching from Selma to Washington for a better America. For voting rights, for jobs, for education, for economic justice. We're marching against racism and sexism and homophobia and anti-transgender thinking, against all the things that hold people back." And to a little African American boy of five or six leaning on his rolled down car window, "We are marching for you. We believe in you. We are marching for your future. We are here for you."⁶

⁴ Debby Irving, *Waking Up White*, pg. 14.

⁵ Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 33a

⁶ Memories as recorded by Rabbi Jessica Oleon Kirschner, Just Congregations, San Francisco, CA

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We are here for you that was his message. ...for black, white, for gay for straight, for all people. We are here for you. And this too is our task. In the next few days, I ask you to consider being here for all individuals in California. Help us fight for racial justice, and advocate.

Reform California is supporting bill AB 953 whose sole focus is on racial and identity profiling.⁷ It will help our state develop a clear picture of what actually happens in California, mandating that officers report basic information about all stops, creating a data base for studying the data, and establishing a diverse commission to review the results. AB 953 is literally in Governor Brown's hands, and we have until the end of the month, a few short days away, to contact Governor Brown's office.

We may not have been able to march from Selma to DC carrying our Torah, but we can pick up our phones march our fingers and make a call, we can march our fingers across a keyboard and send a letter. We know that each contact makes an enormous difference. We can be the light, lighting up Governor Brown's phone, fax and email, helping to ensure change in our community, in our California.

I dream of a world where the lives of Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Senator Pickney, Sandra Bland, Tywanza Sanders, Marquette Frye, and Tamir Rice...where their lives matter... rise up from these pages, and inspire us to move toward action.

And I dream of world where the story of Marian Anderson will one day be true. She used to tell the story of a little African American child who was fascinated by colors; he approached a balloon vendor in the park. Tugging away at their strings, suddenly a red balloon broke away and rose up into the sky. "Mister," the child asked, "would a yellow balloon go as high as a red one?" "Sure would," grinned the man. "And a white one, too," asked the boy? "Yep," said the man. "What about a black one? Would it go as high?" the boy asked. The vendor replied, "Son, it isn't the color that makes it rise. It's the stuff inside."⁸

I dream of a day where real change will come and each person will be able to rise up just as high as his neighbor, based solely on his or her merits...the insides and not the outside package.

Cein Yehi Ratzon – Be this God's will.

⁷ <http://www.rac.org/advocacy/reform-california>

⁸ Dov Peretz Elkin's *Moments of Transcendence* 1994-1995