

Rabbi Benjamin David

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A Rock that Will Not Roll

The Pastor recited the 23rd Psalm from the steps of the church. All around him there was bedlam. Sirens wailed. The masses converged. Rage mixed with pain mixed with devastation on the blazing streets of Birmingham. The blast had shaken the building and sent shockwaves down the block. Windows shattered. Even a half mile away cars jolted off the ground; they seemed to hover mid-air for a long impossible second.

There had been an ever-brief warning that something would happen, an anonymous phone call. 'Three minutes,' is all the voice said. And then: BOOM. 15 sticks of dynamite exploded under the church steps. Four girls were killed instantly. They had been helping each other with their choir robes. Another twenty were injured.

The pastor had worked a long time on that morning's sermon, a sermon that would never be given. It's title: 'A Rock that Will Not Roll.'

You may remember the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. It happened sixty years ago today. Maybe you remember it. Four members of the KKK were later convicted.

I think about the four girls that died that morning: Addie May Collins, aged 14. Cynthia Wesley, aged 14. Carole Robertson, aged 14. Denise McNair, aged 11. The songs they would never sing. The books they would never read. The four places in the choir that would never be filled. The careers they would never have. The places they would never visit. A life that lasted eleven years and ended at church as a fiery racism burned bright in Birmingham and too many places to count, especially in those days, a racism that burned brighter and more egregious than any explosion.

Birmingham was the epicenter, nicknamed Bombingham for the bombings that targeted black churches and schools at the time.

Thousands attended the girls' funerals. Subsequent unrest led to marches in and around Birmingham. Every day our nation was waking up to the realities all about them, namely a society that, exactly a hundred years following the Emancipation Proclamation, still lived by a racist code, a white supremacy that infiltrated not only a segregated south but so many corners of American life, from politics to education to health care to housing to the murmured judgmentalism that had become the norm at too many white kitchen tables to enumerate.

I stood with my son Elijah at the 16th Street Baptist Church this past year. We were there with a big group of wide-eyed KI teens and parents. We stood there. We touched the church. Our feet walked through it. This is not some distant, unknowable place; it isn't a relic. It is our history, yours and mine and all of ours.

We came there on a pilgrimage to see and feel these places, to look up from our phones, turn off the TV, take in a reality that we too often choose not to see, open ourselves to people and places right here in this land that will challenge and change us and rethink what it means to be a Jew and American citizen.

Elijah and I and our group walked over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, the site of Bloody Sunday in 1965, when police beat back those intent on marching to the state capital to demand equal voting rights. Their eyes burned with tear gas, their heads gushed under Billy clubs; they retreated, broken and bruised, only to take up the march days later and finally make it all the way to Montgomery, 55 miles away.

When we walked across that historic bridge we again felt history beneath our feet; you could close your eyes and almost picture the scene all those years ago, hear in your ears the cries of those who would not be denied, the perseverance in their veins, the conviction in their hearts, the loud cry for acceptance. How the march had to happen, how they believed that allowing themselves to be stopped by a cavalcade of white enforcement would be the end of the Civil Rights movement itself.

They thought that and maybe they were right.

Joanne Bland was one of the youngest marchers; she was our guide that day: feisty and funny, and still sorrowful all these years later. She said that we cannot look away. She said that we cannot explain it away. The bridge, it matters. The church, it matters. The dead, they matter. She still lives in Selma and walks the bridge and gives the tours and speaks of the past even if it's painful to her and to us because it must be done.

So that my kids and your kids know the story, so that my kids and your kids don't look away from the racist stories and we all vow to do better and vow to bring our country to a more accepting place. It all matters.

These stories matter. And not just to our African American brothers and sisters, or those keenly committed to justice, or devoted students of history, not just to tourists or journalists; the stories of Selma and Birmingham and Montgomery matter because they are our stories. These are your stories. These are American stories. Don't look away, she said.

It's one thing to urge our kids to be open and understanding and kind. It's one thing to remind our kids to reject hate and hatefulness and ignorance. It's one thing to read about race and see the movies and visit the sacred sites of the Civil Rights movement.

This is about so much more than that. This is about going further. Because we were strangers in a strange land and we know what it means to be made to feel strange. We know what it means to be made to feel small or inferior or something other than sacred. We know because we have been there, our people have been there and not only in ancient Egypt, but eastern Europe not a century ago and even in our own day, when antisemitism swarms all around us.

Some of us grew up in a time when a quiet racism lived even within the Jewish community, quiet or unspoken. Some of us were privy to slurs and belittling comments. Some of us overheard our grandparents use words that were wrong, Yiddish phrases designed to demean and worse than that. Even in Jewish spaces there are those who witnessed derogatory behavior or language.

We laughed when we shouldn't have. Or didn't speak up when we might have. We didn't see it as harmful or problematic. What's the big deal, we said?

The Torah itself will discuss the slaves that our people owned and how they were to be treated, as will the Talmud. Tractate Gittin will make clear that the rabbis themselves held slaves. As did so many Jewish families in the American south, including in places like Charleston. The Jewish story, the Jewish world, has not always come to the aid of the downtrodden, not always, and certainly not consistently. Maybe this too becomes our motivation to go further now.

As we angle toward a more just and equitable world, as names like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor prompt us toward a greater good and more goodwill, even now I wonder if we are going as far as we might. Are we going as far as we can today to fight racism and prejudice in our midst, in our community, in our country? Are you going as far as you can?

Ta-Nehisi Coates dreams that his young son will become a 'conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.'

I wonder what it means to be fully conscious to the otherness that our African American friends so often experience. The microaggressions. The generalizations and stereotypes that are so hurtful and horrible. The gradual unmooring and silencing of a history rooted in relentless hate and oppression. 'Never forget,' writes Coates, 'that for 250 years black people were born into chains – whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.'

There are those who want to diminish these stories, explain away pain and historic trauma. There are those who want us to move on because our past is painful and hard. They want to close books rather than open them, end stories rather than air them.

Some of the books that have been outlawed in school districts recently:

How to Be An Anti-Racist.

All American Boys.

Beloved.

To Kill a Mockingbird.

The Life of Rosa Parks.

What do they have in common? They speak uncomfortable truths and deal with uncomfortable ideas. They force a reckoning with our own assumptions and the ways that we conceptualize both our own past and our nation's past. It's precisely why such books are important.

I will tell you, as the grandson of Holocaust survivors, that I believe the banning of books anywhere is a direct threat to Judaism and Jewish life. Banning books should rattle something deep in your soul, jar to life something buried deep in your DNA, spark you awake to say: 'No. No. I cannot allow it.' Even if you had no family in Germany or Poland or Austria, even if you've never stepped foot in these places, there is a memory you carry in your Jewish consciousness of what happened there.

In your mind's eye, deep in your Jewish soul, maybe you see flashes of flames rising high into the Berlin sky in November of 1938, clouds of smoking rising up into the Vienna night as Nazis shattered synagogue windows, arrested Jews and burned piles of books in public squares. Kristallnacht was, in the words of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'an essential turning point in Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews, which culminated in the attempt to annihilate the European Jews.'

Banned books matter to us Jews. We've seen it before. Different time, different place, but largely the same types of books, books that raise up difference and minority points of view, books that tell another side, call up lessons in prejudice, ask bold questions of an otherwise content status quo.

Those are exactly the books I want my kids to read. Those are the books we Jews should want to read.

If racism pulls at your heart and racist thinking triggers a visceral reaction there may be another reason too. It's because you are part of the KI community. The KI family, this congregational family, has never been on the side of hatefulness or ignorance. This is the place, right here, that has been at the forefront of the Reform Jewish community's commitment to civil rights and the civil rights movement, even before it was an official movement.

Eradicating racism has been enshrined in the KI story from the start, from those early congregants who fought with abounding courage in the Civil War, intent on undoing the slavery and slave-owning tendencies of southern neighbors through the great weight of the civil rights movement to this very day.

It was Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf who, from the KI pulpit, issued these words in April of 1916:

'(The black man) is free but still a slave; he has been given his liberty; but suffers from tyranny still...The doors of equality and opportunity and justice are still tightly closed to most of his people. Barring honorable exceptions, where others live, he may not live; the higher pursuits that others follow, he may not follow; in the cars in which others ride, he may not ride; at the hotels at which others stop, he may not lodge; at the restaurants at which others are served, he may not eat; where others amuse themselves, he may not enter.... He is entitled by all that is right and holy to his full freedom and to all the educational and economic advantages that may make his freedom a blessing to the white man as well as to himself.'

He was speaking to the congregation then, but speaking as well to the congregation now. He was talking to us.

In 1936 The Sisterhood had a speaker on the lives of African Americans in Philadelphia. That same year Rabbi Fineshriber preached on the book *Tobacco*

Road, which tells the story of a fictional family in the rural south and became an 'indictment on a failed southern economic system,' as one commentator put it.

In 1939 the rabbi spoke about strengthening Race Relations at a town meeting at the Chestnut Street Baptist Church.

There are more examples.

What can you do? How can you carry on the great KI tradition of fighting back, of standing up tall to hate? How can you raise up kids that are actively and pro-actively anti-racism, anti-ignorance, anti-narrowmindedness? How can we do our part to replace a society's apologetics with empathy and understanding and partnership? How can we stop finding excuses and start finding the humanity in every other while urging others to do the same?

Well, you can open books. You can educate yourself. Specifically, let me invite you to read *On Repentance and Repair*, a stirring book by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg. So in addition to Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ibram Kendi, in addition to MLK, Rabbi Ruttenberg's book teaches us to listen to the stories of others and to acknowledge the pain of others. This is my invitation to read it with us and join us in thinking about the hard questions the book raises.

You can also get involved with the wonderful work of our social justice committee or the wonderful work of our inclusion committee. You can give to the causes that raise up equality and fight hate. You can join me as we reignite relationships with the black churches all around us. You can make sure your teens come on our next Civil Rights trip. You can join the Cantor in her work around Champions for Cheltenham which has us build community with under-served families in our community.

You can go out this year and choose love. You can go out this year and choose hope. You can choose compassion. You can choose inclusion and grace. You can choose education and learning. You can choose peace. You can choose a more peaceful tomorrow. In honor of the four girls. In honor of KI's rabbis. In honor of those who lived through Kristallnacht and worse. In honor of Joanne Bland.

In honor of your children and grandchildren and their grandchildren, those who will go to stand on the Edmund Pettus Bridge ten and fifty and a hundred years from now and learn not only about Bloody Sunday but whether or not we told the story of Bloody Sunday you and I, whether we made sure the story lived on as a bright flashing light to the world of what becomes of unchecked hatred and cowardice.

Will they know what happened at the church? Will they know about "A Rock that Will Not Roll"?

You can choose to raise up compassion and justice so that a hundred years from now they will look back in their sermons and storytelling and learn from the choices we make now. Amen.