

Slifka

Center for Jewish Life at Yale



Dear Members of the Yale Jewish community,

I hope you are finding moments for rest and renewal this week. On Monday our nation will honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day I would like to offer this reflection on American Jewish discourse around race. My hope is despite any confusion, guilt, frustration, or fear we will all be able to find our voice in our country's ongoing racial discourse.

American Jewry has long upheld a pantheon of powerful Jewish activists who played a significant role in the civil rights movement: Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, Balfour Brickner, Joachim Prinz and many others. Above all of these other leaders, for many American Jews, the most iconic representation of Jewish racial justice work is the friendship between Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Both were powerful religious leaders and outspoken advocates for political and social change in the civil rights movement. When King galvanized people across the nation to come to Selma, Alabama to join in nonviolent protest against segregation and denial of African-American voting rights, Heschel marched 54 miles alongside him.

As a Jew of color, Rabbi, and an advocate for racial justice, I am glad that our community makes such a concerted effort to lift up Heschel and his relationship with King. Each time we emphasize Heschel's contributions to the civil rights movement we elevate the ideal that Judaism demands our involvement in the pursuit of racial justice.

Unfortunately, many Jewish communities seem to have frozen the conversation around racial justice at Heschel in Selma in 1965. We have in our minds that Jews are and always have been great advocates for racial justice, yet time and again the narrative stalls at Heschel. We treat Heschel as though he were our community's racial justice *shaliach tzibur* (prayer leader or cantor who chants prayers on behalf of the community) and his prayers expiate all responsibility and accountability for American Jews in perpetuity. With our voices focused on ringing out a collective "amen" to Heschel's work, we fail to realize the ways the racial discourse in our country has continued to evolve. We fail to recognize that each one of us is part of a society whose dominant culture and history are built on a foundation of inequality, and that those inequalities compound and worsen when left unaddressed.

As we each wrestle with our own place in our country's national discourse on race, and try to navigate our personal responsibility *vis-a-vis* racism, I still believe we have much to learn from Heschel. In 1963 at the National Conference on Religion and Race, the conference where Heschel and King first met, Heschel offered the following caution to American Jews:

There are several ways of dealing with our bad conscience. (1) we can extenuate our responsibility; (2) we can keep the Negro out of our sight; (3) we can alleviate our qualms by pointing to the progress made; (4) we can delegate the responsibility to the courts; (5) we can silence our conscience by cultivating indifference; (6) we can dedicate our minds to issues of a far more sublime nature.

58 years later, we can look to Heschel's cautions, and identify the normative habits of mind that have become deeply ingrained in our culture. It is hard to hold the truth that we have all managed to find ways to comfort our consciences in the face of inequity. Yet, we do not help ourselves or the cause of justice if we allow ourselves to become numbed by the weight of our own guilt.

Fortunately, in this critique Heschel offers us a starting place, an audit for our consciences. We can begin by identifying the ways these six habits of mind filter into our thoughts and are reflected in our actions or inaction. Then, as if this list were a social justice *vidui* (the litany of confessional prayers said on Yom Kippur) we can push ourselves to overcome these habits of mind through repentance, prayer, and a recommitment to personal responsibility.

Throughout his work, Heschel also models for us what allyship should look like. Heschel made an effort to surround himself with people from different backgrounds. He not only supported King as a social leader, but also befriended King and cultivated a personal relationship. He did not hold King accountable for teaching him why racial justice was important or how he, as a white Jew, should respond to the problems. Despite narrowly escaping Nazi Germany and losing many family members in the Holocaust, Heschel does not compare his plights with King's. Throughout his writings on race Heschel always refers to himself as a white man, acknowledging that even in the face of antisemitism he benefits from the privileges of whiteness. In claiming his own privilege, Heschel does not allow his own experiences of prejudice to excuse him from taking responsibility for fighting the prejudices plaguing others.

While Heschel offers us a great role-model for certain elements of racial justice work, not all of Heschel's work on race has aged well. For example, at the aforementioned 1963 conference Heschel suggests:

This Conference should dedicate itself not only to the problem of the Negro but also to the problem of the white man, not only to the plight of the colored but also to the situation of the white people, to the cure of a disease affecting the spiritual substance and condition of every one of us. What we need is an NAAAP, a National Association for the Advancement of All People.

I believe that Heschel's intention here is to suggest that racism is a spiritual malady that we *all* need to heal from. Nonetheless, today, Heschel's words, like the words "All lives matter," feel like a misunderstanding and erasure of the particular insular needs of people of color. In this sermon, Heschel's core message is that there is no difference between people of different races, that we are all children of God, and that our differences are an illusion we must ignore. This message may seem harmless, but the test of time has proven that when rhetoric calls us to look past racial differences we tend to look past the deep roots of inequality in our society and in our individual subconsciousness. Moreover, looking past our differences means erasing all of the beauty inherent in those differences: our unique cultures, histories, *bodies* and worldviews.

The places where Heschel's rhetoric falls short do not make him any less of an important icon for our community. On the contrary, these shortcomings elevate the fact that few of us will get this work "right" 100% of the time, but we can still make a significant impact by trying to do our part.

It is wonderful to attend a service lead by a great cantor, yet the service would be incomplete without time for individual personal reflection and prayer. This Shabbat instead of discussing how Heschel "prayed with his feet" as he marched in Selma, I urge you to follow in his footsteps. In his words,

Our concern must be expressed not symbolically, but literally; not only publicly, but also privately; not only occasionally, but regularly...What we need is the involvement of every one of us as individuals.

The power of these words are the reminder that the responsibility rests on each of us, not just communally but as individuals. Within the Slifka community many of us are setting aside time each week to explore questions around Judaism and our own individual responsibility around racial justice. If anything in this reflection strikes you and you would like to discuss these ideas further I urge you to reach out so we can continue this conversation.

Shabbat Shalom,

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