An Introduction to Human Rights Shabbat 2019

We’re so gratified that your community is interested in taking part in T’ruah’s observance of Human Rights Shabbat with an emphasis on racial justice.

We want to start this letter with two stories — one that happened in the street, and the other that happened at a dining room table.

On the first night of Chanukah 2014, Jews from all over the Bay Area gathered at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco to express grief and anger over the extrajudicial killings of African-Americans. A Jewish demonstration was organized in the Bay Area, insisting — in a loud, clear Jewish voice — that Black Lives Matter. One of us (Michael) was in attendance.

The plan was to find a spot of heavy commercial activity, and to block traffic, to say that — during the holidays, a time of frenetic business activity — we wouldn’t accept business-as-usual. Not as long as people of color continued to be cut down without trial or hearing.

At a protest, no surprise, things unfold in unexpected ways. First of all, you may think it never rains in California. But, like in Israel, December is the rainy season in California. It rained. A lot.

The rain wasn’t the only thing that was startling.

As the protesters left the spot of the rally and prepared to march, one of the organizers handed out signs. Each one had a Chanukah menorah printed on it. Many of them said, “Black Lives Matter.” We all, of course, agreed. Who wouldn’t?

But the sign that Michael was handed didn’t say that.

It said, “End White Supremacy.”

Whoa. White supremacy. That’s intense. For many of us, the term conjures up images of Klansmen in white robes.

In the meantime, Jews of all ages and colors were getting into formation to march, balancing song-sheets, tallises, and umbrellas. As Michael looked at the sign, he thought: why were we there?
Even though cars driven by blacks are less likely to contain illegal substances than those driven by whites, African-Americans are more likely to be pulled over. People of color are *more* likely to be stopped-and-frisked. *More* likely to be arrested than whites. *More* likely to be convicted of crimes. *More* likely to be sentenced to prison time.

But law enforcement is only representative of a larger culture. People of color are *less* likely to be approved for bank loans than whites, even when they have the same wealth and income. *Less* likely to be hired for jobs they qualify for. *Less* likely to be offered apartment rentals.

And further. Why had the US government (then run by a Democrat) begun detaining and deporting millions of immigrants — the vast majority of whom were people of color — even though our American economy was built on their labor?

And if people of color were *less* likely to be granted society’s benefits, didn’t it mean, by nothing more than the accidental benefit of light skin, white Jews were *more* likely to be?

The San Francisco sky did not relent. Truths fell with the rain. Those who marched that night had to admit that, according to every metric important to regular Americans, white lives — even white Jewish lives — were valued over black lives. Or brown lives. In our town. On our streets.

If that isn’t white supremacy, what is?

If we were going to speak our truths to our city and our country, we had to be honest.

We had to tell *ourselves* the truth.

"End White Supremacy."

Michael grabbed hold of the sign and marched with it.

Five years later, and the world is not a safer place for immigrants, nor for African-Americans. And, for that matter, it is not a safer place for Muslims, for gay or trans folks, for women. And, of course, not for Jews. It is, by any objective measure, a less safe place.

And we have to acknowledge — white supremacy has a whole lot to do with it.

It’s what led to the other story, a conversation at Susannah’s dining room table. Michael and Susannah were sharing some coffee, bemoaning the struggles that Jewish communities were having in addressing racism, both within our own walls and in the greater American landscape.
Michael remarked to Susannah, “It must frustrate you that so many Jewish communities point with pride at the picture of your father marching with King — but then ignore the racism in their own spaces.”

“I’ll tell you this,” Susannah said. “Jewish communities that don’t address modern racism have no right to display that picture of my father.”

It was a moment of both frustration and clarity.

The Jewish world has a lot of resources at its disposal. What if, we wondered, Jewish communities committed to facing the issue openly and honestly? Could this be a nationwide effort?

Thanks to T’ruah, that’s just what it is. Each year, T’ruah asks Jewish communities to reserve a Shabbat near International Human Rights Day, December 10th, as Human Rights Shabbat. This year we are asking Jewish clergy and communities to use this event to focus specifically on combating American racism and to begin a year-long engagement with racism and racial justice.

Racism is enduring, ubiquitous, ever-present, complex and multifaceted. 400 years after enslaved Africans were brought to this continent, African Americans still await true freedom and justice after centuries of enslavement, Jim Crow laws, and today’s New Jim Crow of mass incarceration. The hostility and cruelty directed against POCs flies in the face of our common humanity and, we believe, rips at the very heart of God. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, we forfeit the right to worship God when we humiliate people of color.

We are asking Jewish communities this year to go beyond what Human Rights Shabbat has been in the past and make a commitment to oppose racism in sustained ways beyond a single Shabbat. Let us recognize the many ways racism is expressed, both deliberately and through implicit bias.

This clergy and community commitment can take many forms, some of which are outlined here. Possible options you might consider include:

- Training clergy and lay leadership in understanding and combating racism.
- Building an ongoing partnership with a local community of color.
- Doing a racial justice audit of board and staff makeup, leadership pipelines, curricula, and decision-making processes.
- Dovetailing your process with trips that the Reform movement’s Central Conference of American Rabbis and T’ruah have taken or are planning to the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala.
• Reading widely, listening to podcasts or seeing films that broaden your experience
• Taking on a political issue such as mass incarceration that ties to T'ruah’s campaigns and expresses an anti-racist view in action

In this packet you will find training materials, Jewish text resources, suggested readings, and organizations to partner with. These are by no means exhaustive lists; they are a place to start. We feel blessed to partner with you on this holy work, both in December and in the year to come.

—Dr. Susannah Heschel and Rabbi Michael Rothbaum, on behalf of the T’ruah Racial Justice team