

Thoughts by Rabbi Friedland, Sinai Synagogue

Those of you who watched the documentary Shared Legacies about the Black-Jewish alliance during the Civil Rights movement will remember one of the most powerful interviews in the film. Rabbi Saul Berman, an Orthodox rabbi involved in protests for civil rights, explained that it was incumbent upon Jews to join the struggle given the Jewish experience during the Holocaust. “How could we condemn Christians for standing idly by as Hitler killed Jews, and then we stand by as injustices were perpetrated against blacks in America?” (paraphrasing his words).

The time has come again for the Jewish community to acknowledge that injustice is continuing to be perpetrated against black and brown communities in our nation. What has been clear since the election of Barak Obama is not that overt racism in America is over because this nation elected a black man to be president, but the opposite: The depth of entrenched racism in our national systems and conscience is so severe that simply expressing platitudes of equality for all and condemning acts of hatred are not enough.

Despite the broad ethnic and racial diversity of Jews, most Jewish Americans have our origin in Europe and thus are white or light skinned. We are able to pass as part of the favored racial majority. It is hard for us, even when we are sympathetic, to truly understand the indignities to which our darker skinned fellow citizens are regularly subjected. Thus it is so important when we watch the news, when we speak to neighbors, when we reflect on the chaos that is agitating our nation at this time, we make sure to listen to voices of our African American, our black and brown, fellow citizens to understand their pain, to understand their frustration, to follow their lead in working toward a just solution that will make our nation what our founders intended it to be – a land of equality and liberty for all citizens whatever their unique qualities.

In Shared Legacies, Susannah Heschel, Abraham Joshua Heschel’s daughter and a scholar in her own right, shared a Hasidic tale. In it the Hasid comes to his rebbe and says, “Rebbe, I love you so much. You are so holy. I love you.” The rebbe turns to his follower with a wistful look, “You say you love me. Do you know what pains me?” “No, Rebbe, I don’t know.” The rebbe looks at his Hasid and says, “How can you say you love me if you don’t know what hurts me?”

Right now, instead of getting caught up in all the sensationalist news coverage about looting, and violent protests (mostly in reaction to violence initiated by police forces against peaceful protests), let us all make an attempt to hear the pain that the average African American citizen is trying to share with us. And let us remember how so many times our ancestors tried to express their pain at the hate and persecution they suffered from but were ignored. We should not make the same mistake as our ancestors’ persecutors.