

## From the Rabbi

### May We Not Be Helpless

“Imma, stop telling me you have friends who are cops. That doesn’t matter. The whole American policing system was designed and created to preserve slavery. The institution of policing in America supports the oppression of black and brown people.” This was a conversation with my adult kids. “We must defund the police!” they say. I’ve struggled to understand what this means, and my kids are among my teachers, while I read whatever I can on the subject. This rallying cry of millennials is now a national movement.

There are those in our community who are engaged with this movement, opining on a new model of resource allocation that shifts large measures (if not the whole) of police budgets to social services, education, housing and health care so that everyone, no matter the color of their skin, gets a fair shot in life.

Then there those in our community with more moderate views on defunding police, worrying about the prospect of losing police protection. (Even while the term “defund police” means different things to various activists.) How could we possibly defund police departments when we need them to protect us in crucial moments? Is there a middle ground?

Then there are those in our community who are upset by the protests and their attacks on police. They are distressed over the death of George Floyd, and still they say to me, “Isn’t the problem with the Black community’s violence and lawlessness?” In their view, looters and vandals prove their point.

Then there are those in our community who are so distressed to see yet another murder of an African American by police that they feel it is immoral to remain on the sidelines or stay home. They use language like, “your inaction is a form of White Nationalism and it is immoral! Your silence is complicit with racists!”

Then there are those who see the plight of the Palestinian people as linked to the cause of Black Americans. For them there is a link between the Palestinians and oppressed African Americans. In their view, the Palestinians are the oppressed victims in an intractable conflict.

Then there are those in our community who are deeply concerned about the Black Lives Matter organization, which aligned itself with BDS and anti-Israel activism. They wonder how we can participate with activists who do not appreciate our people’s centuries of persecution culminating in the horrors of the Holocaust, or the century of war and terrorism Israelis have suffered.

The cacophony is loud and confusing and difficult to hear. I could write an essay responding to each of these arguments. For now, let’s observe the landscape of these views. Here is the essence -- our divisions are tearing us apart. Maybe it is selective hearing that shapes our opinions, or confusion, or profound discomfort. But this is our moment to hear, to learn, and open our hearts to understand. The pain expressed around the world in the chants of “Black Lives Matter” is real, and the time for coming together to repair the ills caused by centuries of systemic racism is NOW.

A recent Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) column highlighted the conflict that many Jewish leaders are experiencing around the calls to defund police in a column, [“Calls to defund the police put Jewish institutions in a tough position.”](#)<sup>1</sup> “Jewish organizations have a history of working closely with law enforcement, and many see police as friend rather than foe. Jewish leaders have been grateful for officers’ quick response to anti-Semitic attacks and consistently recommend to local synagogues and other institutions that they build close

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<sup>1</sup> Calls to Defund the Police put Jewish Institutions in a Tough Position” Ben Sales. JTA June 12, 2020

relationships with the police.” Activists suggest the need to build alliances with other groups who face threats from White Nationalists. This has been our goal in recent years, and we will continue to prioritize strengthening these relationships in a variety of ways.

Jewish tradition addresses our responsibilities. A Talmudic text teaches, “At a time when the community is suffering, no one should say, “I will go home, eat, drink, and be at peace with myself.”<sup>2</sup> Another text teaches, “Anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one’s household and does not, is punished for the actions of the members of the household; anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one’s townspeople and does not, is punished for the transgressions of the townspeople; anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not is punished for the transgressions of the entire world.”<sup>3</sup>

All the way back to our people’s beginning, we have struggled with the human proclivity to judge those who are different. The recent Torah reading from Numbers 12 recalled a conflictual incident in the wilderness between Miriam, Aaron and Moses. It shines a light on an apparent prejudice expressed by Miriam and Aaron over Moses’ marriage to a Cushite woman. Among the interpretations offered, we learn that this may have been a criticism of Moses for marrying a dark-skinned woman. The Divine reaction was swift -- Miriam was punished with an affliction of leprosy, prompting her brother Moses to pray compassionately, “*O God, pray heal her!*”

Now is the time for healing, for coming together to a unity of purpose in a divided and painful time. That is what our people learned in the wilderness.

Author Michelle Alexander wrote in the New York Times, [America, This is Your Chance](#). “We must face our racial history and our racial present. We cannot solve a problem we do not understand... George Floyd would not be dead if, after the Civil War, our nation had committed itself to reparations, reconciliation and atonement for the land and people that colonizers stole, sold and plundered. Instead, white people who enslaved blacks [were granted](#) reparations for the loss of their “property” while formerly enslaved blacks were given nothing — not even the 40 acres and a mule they were promised. Ever since, our nation has been trapped in a cycle of intermittent racial progress followed by [fierce backlash](#) and the emergence of new and “improved” systems of racial and social control... one thing has remained constant: A majority of whites persistently deny the scale and severity of racial injustice that people of color endure.”<sup>4</sup> Nor do they recognize their *white privilege* and the benefits that accrue.

When the world is shrouded in darkness and we are unable to see each other or hear each other’s pain, or talk to one another as equals, we need light. On the Shabbat when we read the Torah’s account of Miriam’s punishment for speaking against Moses’s Cushite wife, the *haftarah* (prophetic reading) from Zechariah offered an uplifting vision for the future. Zechariah imagined a Divine Menorah. “The angel ... woke me as a man is wakened from sleep. He said to me, “What do you see?” And I answered, “I see a lampstand all of gold... This is the word of the LORD ... Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit—said the LORD of Hosts.”<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the light is beginning to shine. Not by might, but by God’s spirit may we transform our society and our world. O God, pray heal us! May we join together to remove the rot of racist thinking and systems, planting gardens of mutuality, understanding, respect, opportunity, and compassion. This is our Jewish call and our responsibility -- and how beautiful it will be to take part in the growth of a new world; may we build this world from love.

~ Rabbi Amy

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<sup>2</sup> Zechariah 4:1-6