

Message from Your President June 3, 2020

CLOSE TO HOME—IN HONOR OF GEORGE FLOYD

Last week, George Floyd, an African American man, was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer. An independent autopsy confirmed that Mr. Floyd died of “asphyxiation from sustained pressure.” According to reports, Mr. Floyd’s neck and back were compressed by a Minneapolis police officer for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while he was handcuffed and pleaded that he could not breathe stating this at least 16 times in less than 5 minutes until becoming unresponsive for the final 2:53. Three other officers, all of whom likely heard Mr. Floyd’s pleas, either actively participated or acted as lookout while Mr. Floyd was being killed.

I am outraged and fearful.

In February, two White Men murdered Ahmaud Arbery, a Black Man, while he was out for a jog in Brunswick, Georgia. (The county prosecutor then attempted to “bury” the case.) A day prior to the Floyd killing, a white Woman in NYC threatened a birder, Christian Cooper, a black man, after he simply asked her to leash her dog in a leash-only area. In response, she warned Mr. Cooper before calling the police — “I’m going to tell [the police] there’s an African-American man threatening my life!” She understood that making such a threat would have real traction.

I am outraged and fearful.

Like Mr. Floyd, in 2014, Eric Garner died after a New York City police officer placed him in a chokehold during an attempted arrest over selling single cigarettes. Add to Mr. Garner’s name the names of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and countless others.

Yes. I am outraged and fearful.

Of course this hits close to home for me. I am married to a wonderful and amazing African woman. My two beautiful, smart and zestful teenage children are African American. When they leave home each day, I wonder: Is this the day something will happen so one of them won’t come home to me?

My son—and let’s face it, most police violence is directed at black men—is an athlete and routinely goes for a run in the “neighborhood.” As he grows and his runs are for longer distances, those neighborhoods are expanding to areas where people do not know him. What is their response going to be when they see a six-foot, muscular black man running through their neighborhood as the sun is setting? Will they think of him as an A student, or a star soccer player, or someone who is the cusp of his first adult relationship? Or will they think of him as a black man who is a stranger and a threat? How do you think our neighbors will respond? History tells us.

So yes, I am outraged and fearful.

In their short lives, both my children have faced prejudice in a way that I never had to when I was growing up in a town outside Boston where we were the first Jewish family and where I faced antisemitism from teachers and peers. My children have been physically attacked while at school (something the school failed to alert me to until almost a week after the incident, but that’s a whole other story); they have been targeted by teachers both with grade deflation and

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when a teacher could find no one else to blame for classroom conduct; and they have had to withstand verbal barrages from their peers based on race. None of these events was singular but happened time and time again.

Recently my son got his driver's learner's permit. This triggered a whole new set of apprehensions. A recent Stanford University Study analyzed 93 million traffic stops from 21 state patrol agencies and 29 municipal police departments between the years of 2001 and 2017 and concluded that, on average, black drivers are 20% more likely to get pulled over than white drivers. The Stanford University study is consistent with other studies undertaken by other universities and public interest organizations. These studies also found that black drivers are more likely to be searched and are more likely to have a gun pointed at them during a traffic stop than their white counterparts. Like many of you, I have read news releases of several police killings of black men during traffic stops including those of Walter Scott, Samuel DuBose and Philando Castile, to name a few.

Statistically, Vermont is worse than most of the nation. Would you have thought that? A recent study undertaken by UVM established that black drivers are four times (4X) more likely than white drivers to be searched by Vermont police, even though they are less likely to be found with illegal items. According to the American Civil Liberties Union of Vermont "[t]he data simply prove what black and brown Vermonters have long known from hard experience: that biased policing is real in Vermont and it's getting worse."

So I met with the Shelburne police to express my concern and inquire about steps my son and I could or should take to protect ourselves. The police officer I met with assured me that there is no racial bias or profiling conducted by the Shelburne Police. When I countered this statement with the statistics, the response was that the statistics are not always accurate. So I left that interview with the assurance that the police officers are good guys, don't engage in racial bias or profiling, and do not conduct themselves the same way as police officers across the rest of Vermont or, indeed, the United States. Would you be comfortable?

In 1999, the ACLU undertook a special report to identify racial profiling on our highways and identified five specific acts for governments to take. Over the twenty-one intervening years, the racial profiling continues undeterred. Other than some research, none of the five specific acts for government to take have been enacted. History again tells us that our institutions have not changed in regard to racial injustice.

So I remain outraged and fearful because the story does not end here.

According to recent police violence mapping, African Americans are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police officers than White Americans; and further, 99% of police officers go uncharged in these circumstances. I can tell you that even growing up on that small town outside Boston, my parents never feared whether I would return home at night. But this is not and will not be the case for me and my children who should expect to face institutionalized racism and a heightened threat of brutality and violence by those sworn to protect them.

History tells us that racism has thrived in the United States for hundreds of years. It is in our streets and in our neighborhoods. It is ingrained in our institutions. I am sure each of the four police officers involved in the murder of George Floyd consider themselves to be a good people.

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History tells us that this is exactly the result we should expect when racism is allowed to continue to be an integral part of our culture and when it is not confronted head-on by those who are offended.

I have always believed that as Jews we have or should have a special connection to other minorities. In my mind, I have equated the Holocaust and the long history of prejudice against Jews with the brutality of slavery. To a large degree, Jews and African Americans are brothers and sisters to institutionalized prejudice. In my mind, however, one difference in particular has stood out. Namely that while there have been acts of reconciliation towards Jews, there have never really been such acts towards African Americans. This does not mean antisemitism has been eliminated—clearly antisemitism continues to flourish—but only that a hand reached out. When I search for an explanation for this omission for the African American community, I come to the understanding that at a certain level of white America's psyche African Americans have always been and continue to be fundamentally and systemically devalued and degraded, considered something lesser than whites, and never placed on an equal footing as whites. In his June 1st post, Rabbi eloquently linked the connection between distorted justice administered to our Black Brothers and Sisters to our Jewish heritage and need to take action. Rabbi writes:

When people feel justice is not possible, we resort to more immediate expressions of anger. None of us condone looting, but many of us empathize with the sense of outrage. We know this convulsion is the cry of a people after hundreds of years of slavery reaching a breaking point, as our ancestors cried out in Egypt. It is up to us to hear that cry and respond, so that the voice of these protests “goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

You can connect to Rabbi's full statement via this link:

<https://files.constantcontact.com/dabee163001/7ea4ce44-0cbb-4cf3-8769-5c70675fb1f5.pdf>.

This brings me round to where I started. I hope that you can share in my outrage and fear. So the question I pose for us is this: How can we as Jews honor George Floyd? I want to borrow from an article by **Chris Harrison**, a Black Jewish Man (or a Jewish Black Man) who is a member of Temple Beth El in Detroit and a writer and editor for the Union for Reform Judaism. Mr. Harrison writes (the link to the full article is

<https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2020/06/01/black-jews-are-tired>):

If you are white and want to do good, here's how to start.

When acts of racism (like the ones mentioned above) occur, reach out to your Black friends with support, a willingness to listen to their needs, and the courage to act on their behalf, including: financially supporting antiracist initiatives; calling out racism on social media; showing up to march with (and protect) Black protestors; and calling out other white people on their racism.

Further, our congregations and Jewish institutions must *instantly* speak out against acts of racism whenever they occur and follow up with action. We must prove that our prayers are not just poetic gestures; they are the centuries-old sacred fuel empowering us to stand firm in the face of the Pharaohs of our day.

[A]ntiracism must be as integral to and synonymous with our Jewish communities as reciting the *Sh'ma*.

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I also implore every congregation to take the Union for Reform Judaism's Audacious Hospitality congregational assessment, which we will provide in the coming weeks ([Learn more about it here.](#)) Our communities cannot be complacent or willfully ignorant about the ways in which we fail to include or advocate for marginalized groups, including Jews of Color and People of Color on the whole. We must honestly assess our implicit biases, our underwhelming actions, and even the harm we may have caused. This, in and of itself, is a form of *t'shuvah*, repentance.

In addition to the steps outlined by Mr. Harrison, please look to upcoming activities to kick-start a conversation on privilege, racism, and social action for our community currently being planned by our Social Action Committee (SAC). I am sure the SAC will make suggestions about specific acts white people can undertake to support racial justice. Finally, please show your support against injustice by coming together as a community this Thursday at 7:00 for Waters from the Well: A Gathering to Restore Our Spirit at this link: [Service Link](#). Thank goodness Temple Sinai gets it and thank goodness Rabbi gets it.

Thank you to all of you hearing my concerns. Thank you to those who join and support me, my family and our African American Community in our outrage and fear. I know I am blessed to be part of our Temple Sinai community. I want to specially recognize Judy Alexander and Rabbi, both of whom have reached out to me and my family in the wake of the killing of Mr. Floyd. My heart goes out to Mr. Floyd and his family, and to the thousands and millions of African Americans who unnecessarily suffer injustice every day.

May we all stay safe and work towards a world filled with peace and harmony.

Shalom.

Your President, Doug Marden

Links to some of the materials I relied on in writing this message are below:

<https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2020/06/01/black-jews-are-tired>.

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/bryan-stevenson-on-the-frustration-behind-the-george-floyd-protests>

<https://www.aclu.org/report/driving-while-black-racial-profiling-our-nations-highways> (1999)