

Rosh Hashanah 5781 - September 19, 2020

Anthem - What the World Needs Now

In the beginning there was darkness and chaos and the breath of God swept over the firmament and God said let there be light and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)

And God formed man from the dust of the earth. God blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

(Genesis 2:7)

...And Cain set upon Abel and Killed him. (Genesis 4:8)

And the officer set his knee upon George Floyd's throat for 8 minutes and 46 seconds and George Floyd spoke saying "I can't breathe." three words that moved me to tears and anguish. Three words we should never have to hear. Three words that never should have had to be spoken. Three words that lit our world on fire. George Floyd is not the first or last man of color to die with these words on his lips, but his life is the spark that should start the fire of justice raging in all of us. I am not talking about movements, or their biases, I am talking about justice for all, a legal system that protects everyone's rights.

I was taught four words in the fifth commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” And in five words I was taught “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If we splurge on eleven words we are taught “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

But George Floyd barely had a dying breath enough to say “I can’t breathe.” The breath of God was driven from his lungs by another man until George Floyd was dead.

Did no one teach his murderer kindness, understanding, mercy or compassion? Did no one teach him “thou shall not murder?”

George Floyd’s words make it hard for me to breathe, I can only imagine what he felt in his final moments, having a knee on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds. If you haven’t watched the video, I implore you to watch it and imagine that he is your family member being murdered before everyone’s eyes. George Floyd’s death and his last words call us all to evaluate how we view the world, how we see each other, what kind of world we want to create and what kind of world we want to live in. I don’t claim that George Floyd was perfect. I do claim he had the right to due process. Nothing he did called for the death penalty served by one vile man charged with upholding the law.

What in this world did Geroge Floyd do to deserve dying like this? I know many people think they have answers, but none of those answers justify anyone kneeling on an individual's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. I am not in law enforcement. I was not there. But with three other officers there to witness the interaction, all of them could have helped to insure Geroge Floyd made it into custody so he could survive his due process. We are taught that we are innocent until proven guilty. Even as a citizen is being arrested, you are still innocent until the evidence proves itself out. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Jacob Blake, too many names to list, shot or murdered for the color of their skin and the hatred held in another's heart.

As Jews we know what it is to say the words "I can't breathe." How many of our relatives couldn't breathe in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, marched into the showers by individuals just following orders? How many of our loved ones couldn't breathe as they were shot enmass and some buried alive amongst their dead relatives in the death pits of Ponary in Lithuania, or Babi Yar in Kiev to name a few? How many Jews couldn't breath during the Pogroms of Eastern Europe or the forced expulsions over a

thousand years from every country we called home where for centuries we were forced to pack what we could carry on our backs? Expelled from England, Spain, France, Iraq, and Iran among so many countries, just because we were Jews.

As Jews, we understand what it means when someone cries out “I can’t breathe.” We’ve felt hands around our throats ever since we’ve found ourselves in communities who only viewed us as the stranger, the other.

We know what it means when someone says “I can’t breathe,” and yet in America we’ve been quite comfortable for the last forty years or longer. Since World War II we’ve been given plenty of space to breathe, work hard, raise families and know a large amount of success. The color of our skin has allowed many of us to blend in and gain acceptance even as some of our names or noses may have caused us to stick out. As we’ve thrived in our new found breathing room we’ve done a lot to fight inequality, to stand next to our fellow citizens who still needed to fight for their personal freedoms, fight for their room to breathe.

During the civil rights movement, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched side by side with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

In Susannah Heschel's article, **Two Friends, Two Prophets**, on their friendship she writes how her father "appears beside Martin Luther King Jr. in several of the most iconic photographs of that time: crossing Edmund Pettus Bridge arm in arm in March 1965; standing together outside Arlington Cemetery in silent protest of the Vietnam War in 1968.

Heschel's presence in the front row of marchers was a visual symbol of religious Jewish commitment to civil rights, and "stirred not only the Jewish religious community **but** Jews young and old into direct action, galvanizing the whole spectrum of activists from fundraisers to lawyers." [Rabbi Heschel's] critique extended to religious communities: "We worry more about the purity of dogma than about the integrity of love. ...What is lacking is a **sense** of the **monstrosity** of inequality." Racism is "the test of our integrity, a magnificent spiritual opportunity" for radical change. "Reverence for God is shown in reverence for man.... To be arrogant toward man is to be blasphemous toward God."

<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/leadership/two-friends-two-prophets>

We all know the fight for justice and equality has never ended. Most of us understand the protests, the anger, the frustration. Most of us do not condone the violence, the vandalism or the looting. I feel for the movement and I feel for the times. It seems only fitting that in the middle of a global pandemic that takes your lungs and breath we find ourselves in a time defending the life and breath of those who need us to come to their defense.

It troubles me greatly, however, that I have to separate the cause from the movement. It troubles me that even within a movement that cries for an end to injustice, violence and often death for people of color, somehow antisemitism enters the movement as if the Israel-Palestinian conflict had anything to do with the death of George Floyd. So please understand that while I mourn the senseless death of George Floyd and so many others, and stand for the equality and rights of people of color, I am appalled at the blatant antisemitism that has been inserted into the movement.

My best friend is a police officer who made it to assistant chief of police in the town he grew up in in Connecticut. He's one of the thousands of good cops in our nation. He stands for the rule of law, justice, compassion, innocence until proven guilty and

everything righteous about what it is supposed to mean to the uniform and badge to protect and serve.

So please also understand that while I strongly support the police, I also believe that we have a lot of work to do to ensure accountability, and to ensure racism has no home in our police forces. In fact racism should have no home in our country. As modern survivors who know Jews who have suffered countless murders at the hands of legal authorities over the last thousand years, we must stand up as defenders and witnesses when our authorities disregard their duties and use their power to cause senseless murders.

Maimonides taught that “All the evils that men cause to each other because of certain desires, or opinions or religious principles are rooted in ignorance. [All hatred will come to an end] when the earth was flooded with the knowledge of God. We live in a time of ignorance. How many of us have had to let go of friends and stopped talking to family members because we can no longer bridge our differences? How many of us watch the news or read articles on behavior we can’t fathom belonging to 2020?

Our writings teach us in the book of Jeremiah how “One man cheats the other, They will not speak truth; They have trained their

tongues to speak falsely; They wear themselves out working iniquity. You dwell in the midst of deceit. In their deceit, they refuse to heed Me —declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:4-5). It very much feels like we've returned to those times where some of our citizens accept bold lies at face value and believe untruths because it makes them feel better, makes them feel in charge, makes them feel as if they are connected to those in positions of power. The saddest part is when we are related to or close friends to some of these individuals and must part ways or simply stop speaking to them or reading their posts. In my lifetime, I never imagined a moment like this could occur within America at a time when we seemed to have been making so much progress.

Deuteronomy 16:20 reads, Tzedek Tzdek Tirdof, Justice Justice Shall You Pursue. We must all maintain an understanding of what justice means for each of us. As humans, as Jews we must pursue justice for everyone in order to insure justice for ourselves.

There's a story of a king who was sitting with his minister.

"One day, on a warm afternoon, on the second floor of a splendid palace that overlooked the market place of the city, sat a king and his minister. While the king was eating some honey on puffed rice,

he looked over his land with satisfaction. What a prosperous city he ruled. What a magnificent city

As the two were talking, a little drop of honey dripped from his puffed rice onto the window ledge.

The minister was about to call a servant to wipe up the honey, when the king waved a hand to stop him. "Don't bother, it's only a little drop of honey, it's not our problem."

The minister watched the drop of honey slowly trickle down the window ledge and land on the street below.

Soon, a buzzing fly landed on the sweet drop of honey.

A nearby lizard shot out its long tongue and caught the fly.

The lizard was taken by surprise when a cat leapt on it.

The cat was pounced on by its worst enemy, the neighbor's dog that had broken free from its chain.

Meeowing and barking erupted from the street below the King and his minister. The minister was about to call a servant to go and deal with the brawling cat and dog when the king said, "Relax, the

cat and dog belong to the market people. We shouldn't interfere. It's not our problem."

The cat's owner was horrified to see her cat being attacked by the big bully of a dog and started whacking the dog with her broom. The dog's owner was horrified to see his dog being attacked by the big bully of a cat and started whacking the cat with his broom.

Soon, people started coming out from their stalls and houses to see what all the screaming and shouting was about. Seeing their friend's cat being attacked, they joined in berating the dog and its owner. Others, seeing their friend's dog being attacked by the cat, also joined in. Very quickly, the shouting became violent and a fight broke out in the street.

The worried minister turned to the King but his only comment was, "Not our problem. Here, have some more puffed rice and honey." The king and his adviser ate as they watched the fray below.

Soon the police were called in to break up the fight, but the people were so angry, each side convinced that they were right, (right about what, they couldn't remember). They started attacking the policemen. The fight rapidly broke out into a full scale riot.

The king eyed the minister and said, “I know what you are thinking, but the army will handle it. Besides, this is not our problem.”

The riot swiftly escalated into a civil war with looting and destruction all over the city. Buildings were set ablaze and by nightfall, the magnificent city was reduced to a pile of smoking ashes. The king and his minister stood spellbound, rooted to the spot where they had been watching all day. Their mouths were hanging open in horror at all the king had caused thinking the drop of honey was someone else’s problem.”

<http://storywise.com.sg/storytelling/a-little-drop-of-honey/>

One drop of honey in the wrong place has the ability to cause an entire society to burn. Our cities are burning. Our forests are burning. Our hearts are burning for positive change, justice and a return to civil discourse. Justice is our responsibility. For too long we have relied on others to create the justice we seek. For too long we have been too patient waiting for those who’ve come after us to receive the justice and equality they deserve. Justice is in the smallest of details, in how we treat each other, how we view each other and how quickly we run to do the right thing. Justice is in every citizen believing that every other citizen is equal and has

the same rights we are all supposed to have. Every citizen has the right to due process and the ability to breathe.

Despite our differences we must raise our voices our one despite all the times no one raised their voices for us. Our Torah teaches us that we are a light to the nations. We must raise our voices to light the way towards justice for all.

As Jews, may we remember all the names of those who died unjustly. May we remember them so they did not die in vain. May we remember all the times we couldn't breathe throughout history in order to be there for those who need us the most now to raise our voices and hold accountable all those who would pervert our justice system and choke any citizen in their care. Our nation needs us to speak up now more than ever to create the day where everyone can finally breathe easy. Cayn yehi ratzon - may this be God's will. L'Shanah tovah