

Racism in the Time of Corona

"The most dangerous creation of any society is the man who has nothing to lose" James Baldwin.

Like you I have been transfixed by the images on my television screen. The rioting and looting and sheer anger that has spread so quickly across our nation in response to the police involved death of George Floyd is a frightening reminder of the racial and economic divide in our country.

For many of us we thought that these battles had been fought and won. At one point the election of an African American President was pointed to with pride by many that we had indeed reached a point in our society where we were close to fulfilling Dr. King's vision of a society where we judged a person by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. But clearly, as a society we have a great deal of work to do to make this dream a reality.

The impact of Covid-19 upon our lives has been hard to fathom. In a very short time we have watched our economy shut down and our way of life change in ways that were unimaginable a few months ago. And while the impact of the virus has created stress for all of us, it has not impacted every American the same. Those who are most vulnerable have been impacted the most; People of color, the poor, those with little access to health care, those living pay check to pay check, and the millions of small business owners who have seen their dream dissolve into bankruptcy.

The senseless death of George Floyd that millions of us watched in disbelief on television revealed a side of America that is all too familiar to men and women of color. The angry response and calls for justice are just the beginning I suspect of a dialogue that needs to be had within our society. We must all ask ourselves, "What does a living wage look like? How can we shrink the gap of economic inequality in our country? How can we improve access to medical care for all Americans?" None of us are born with hate in our hearts or prejudice in our souls. It is learned. "What can we do to educate our society to become more accepting and loving?"

At the same time, I like so many other leaders across the country decry the use of violence to move any political agenda forward. One does not fight fire with fire. That only makes the flames hotter. Fire is best fought with water. Peaceful protests and the ballot box are traditional and proven methods of creating change in our society. So too is education and community involvement.

As our society is slowly beginning to reopen. We are all asking, "What will the 'new normal' look like?" It is frightening to think that the status quo is the new normal. The impact of Covid-19 has only magnified the divisions that exist in our society. Let us use this time to reflect upon how we might shape our 'new normal' into one that is fairer and just for all.

In the words of our siddur, Mishkan T'fillah, *"Disturb us, Adonai, ruffle us from our complacency; Make us dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with the peace of ignorance, the quietude which arises from a shunning of the horror, the defeat, the bitterness and the poverty, physical and spiritual of humans..."*

Disturb us, O God, and vex us; let not Your Shabbat be a day of torpor and slumber; let it be a time to be stirred and spurred to action." Mishkan Tefillah, p. 173

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