

RH1 AM 5774

I hope it comes as no surprise to anyone that we have just commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington. We at Temple B'nai Abraham have a special share in that amazing day. As many know, Joachim Prinz, rabbi of this congregation for some forty years, gave a most stirring, even historic, address. Prinz was a stirring, historic person.

As rabbi in Berlin he was the loudest of the few Jewish leaders who spoke out against the Nazis. His courage was genuine. And when Prinz arrived here in 1939, he was every bit as outraged at the treatment of African-Americans as he was by the treatment of Jews in the Germany he had just left. He threw himself into the civil rights crusade, a commitment of body and soul whose climax was the speech from which President Obama quoted in March in Israel, the speech delivered before the hundreds of thousands who gathered for the March on Washington fifty years and one week ago.

Many here who knew Prinz. They know that when he rose to speak he could speak and speak and speak.... But when he stood up before the Lincoln Memorial that day, his text contained only 479 words...but what 479 words they were. He did not try to tell the African American community that as a Jew he understood their suffering, that because he was a Jew he could relate to them. He told America that in Germany he had seen evil, and it triumphed because good people did nothing. He told America that in America he was seeing evil, and it would triumph if good people did nothing. He told American, the worst thing in the world, is silence.

Five feet six inches tall, but Prinz was a giant. Reminders of him are all around and I think about him a lot. His bravery, his charisma, his eloquence, his utter commitment to that which he thought right. But most of all, I think, if he were here today, would he accuse us of being silent? And if so, about what?

Several weeks ago, I received a phone call from a local legislator. A press conference was being held at an area church regarding legislation to raise the minimum wage dollar. Would I attend? Sure, I said, happy to be there. I wasn't going to speak, there was no role for me to play, just sit in the audience. Truth is I did not know much. I looked forward to learning. So on a Wednesday morning in

early summer I found my way to the New Hope Baptist Church in East Orange. I took my seat, and waited.

First, came the politicians. Mayor Booker was there, eloquent as always. Senator Buono was there, alas for her, right after Mayor Booker. A couple of assemblymen, a couple of mayors, a couple of ministers. I got up and got a cup of coffee. I stared longingly at the donuts, but did not take one. I sat back down, and began wondering when it would be polite to leave. Then the stories began. I began to pay attention.

We heard from the a 19 year old Newark man who took the bus, an hour each way, to a fast food job in one of our communities. He had an unfurnished room in a house. He had no car. He had no health insurance. He was trying to save money to go to school but rent, transportation, food and clothing ate up a huge percentage of his income. He had a scholarship offer from Essex County College, which is already dirt cheap. But even with the scholarship school he still could not afford it. He had not been to a dentist in years. He was soft spoken and straightforward and I could think of no reason not to believe him. He had a full time job.

Also moving was the Spanish speaking woman who spoke through an interpreter. Married with children, and a husband who also worked a minimum wage job, she cleaned airplane cabins at Newark Airport. For her too, a car was out of the question. Her "commute," also an hour each way. The family of five lived in two cramped rooms. They had health insurance, but with that, if they could also handle food and rent and transportation and school supplies...they were lucky. I am sure this woman and her husband volunteered for every bit of overtime they could. While those few dollars helped with their financial bottom line, it also meant their children were alone more.

New Jersey's minimum wage, now \$7.25 an hour, has gone up ten cents in eight years. The nonpartisan Poverty Research Institute estimates that a single adult here needs a \$28,000 annual income to meet basic needs. Someone working forty hours a week at \$7.25 an hour for fifty weeks will earn \$14,500. About half of what one person needs.

And this is not about teenagers scooping ice cream. Over three quarters of New Jersey's hundreds of thousands of minimum wage workers are adults, doing their

best to earn a living in what CNBC says is the fifth most expensive state in the nation.

Our yearly seders remind us our ancestors left Egypt quickly. They barely had time to pack and, of course, there was no time for their bread dough to rise. Soon after, fifty days to be precise, they were given the Torah. In just the blink of an eye after leaving Egypt, they had a new set of rules imposed upon them. Commandments. From God.

What were some of those commandments? We learned about what we can eat and what we cannot eat. We learned about the offerings and sacrifices to be made and when to make them. We learned about the reality and the totality and the eternity of God, and how He wanted us to worship Him. All of that seems...appropriate.

But there were other things too, interesting things, though not things we might have expected. (Lev. 19:13) "The wages of the laborer shall not remain with you until morning." That's kind of a funny verse. Do not hold the laborer's wages until morning...what does it mean? As the Rabbis taught us, the words of the Torah are complex. There is the *p'shat*, the simple surface meaning, but also the *sod*, the more secretive, subtle meaning.

The *p'shat*: if you employ someone to work for you for a day, you pay them at the end of the day. You do not wait until the next day. It's unfair. You could get away with it because the laborer, just coming out of Egypt, would probably think you might not pay them at all. Put another way, you are in a position to exploit someone. Don't do it.

The *sod*: more subtly, we begin to realize that there are other practices in which we simply cannot engage because, then too, we risk exploiting. We cannot ask someone to labor in a workplace that is dangerous. We cannot insist someone work without rest. We cannot demand a child do the work of an adult.

These are things our ancestors, these refugees from Egypt, had to be taught right away. Seven weeks and a day after leaving. Their minds were just beginning to clear. But they had to understand how they would live in their new land. Nothing was more important than making sure they would not simply recreate Egypt.

We, too, have to make sure we do not recreate Egypt. For Holy matters are at stake. And that is why we have this discussion as we enter the holiest period of the year.

This is a time of *heshbon hanefesh*, the accounting of our souls; who we are to ourselves, who we are to others, and who we are in the society around us. The Mishnah teaches: *Averot bein adam lamakom, Yom Hakipurim m'chaper. Averot bein adam l'chavero, ein Yom Hakipurim m'chaper ad sheh y'ratseh et chavero.* For sins between man and God, Yom Kippur atones. Sins between man and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not atone until he has made peace with his fellow.

The fellow, is not necessarily someone we know. The fellow, may be someone we will never meet. But that does not mean that, in some way, we have not hurt him.

That morning in the church was eye opening. Not the politicians and the clergy. The people who earned the minimum wage and lived on it. That moment in the church was also embarrassing. I tried to think of anyone I knew, truly knew, trying to live on the minimum wage. Categories came to mind. Home care aide. Farm worker. Security guard. This was new to me. I am not sure why I felt embarrassed, but I did. Maybe one reason was that what was challenging to them...was advantageous to me.

In retrospect, there is something I admire about the white people who were so active in the civil rights movement, who Marched on Washington, Freedom Riders, those who raised voices in their own community. And my admiration has nothing to do with them acting on principle.

Being principled is a lovely thing, and acting on one's principles is a lovely thing, and standing up for one's principles is a lovely thing. But you know what is even lovelier than being principled? Believing in a principle when it is not in your best interest. Standing up fiercely for something when, not only is there no benefit to you, but there is downside.

50 years ago, what was that called? The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. For jobs. Because of the legislation that came out of that era, the work

force would become more open to African Americans than it had been before. Legal rights would exist that had not before. Opportunities would exist that had not before.... And for whites, competition would exist that had not before. Maybe not right away, maybe not in all fields, but there would be an impact.

Before it had been perfect. Both whites and blacks had to consume, but whites had a stranglehold on who could produce. Now that would begin to change. It was not really in the personal best interests of people like us. But is that a clock anyone here would even think of rolling back?

Raising the minimum wage may not be to our benefit. Few here, this demographic slice, if any, live on it. Raising it may raise prices. For some businesses, it may increase costs. None of us willingly spends more money than we need to. But I will happily accept any price increases this raise would create. That is not money going to fancy restaurants and vacations. It is money going to pay rent and buy milk and purchase pencils and notebooks and get one's teeth cleaned. This is not about race, which is progress of a sort. But it is about providing opportunity.

On November 5, New Jersey goes to the polls. We will elect a governor, state senators, and state assemblymen. We will also have two ballot questions. Public question number two will ask us to approve a constitutional amendment raising the minimum wage to \$8.25, and allow for cost of living increases after that. With a current minimum wage that provides only half what one person needs to live with the minimum of dignity and self-reliance, Jewish tradition would say our choice is clear. I urge you to vote yes.

Now, perhaps, a little surprise. I would like you to vote for this measure. But if you genuinely think it is not the right thing, I would rather you vote against it, than not vote at all. And this goes back to Prinz and to his word, "silence."

Prinz talked about one kind of silence, the silence of good people who do not do what they know should do. He believed many good Germans knew what they should do but did not. In a January, 1963 speech here, at Temple B'nai Abraham, Martin Luther King said he believed about 85 percent of Christian and Jewish clergy in the South favored desegregation but "most are cautious rather than courageous." Prinz and King were right. That was silence. And it was tragic.

If Rabbi Prinz were here today, would he accuse us of being silent? I have given what I believe to be one answer. But there is a broader issue, and that is what makes the words Prinz uttered fifty years ago not just stirring, not just moving, but utterly compelling. Impossible to ignore.

Today we are silent and there are things to be not silent about. The Talmud teaches *zo-he derech ha-olam*, that is the way of the world. There are always things to be not silent about. But whether that is the way of the world or not, it is the job of the Jew not to be silent. There is too much to be done. The world cannot afford our silence.

We live in a world where the Syrian president gasses his own people. We live in a world where instead of going to school Bengali children take apart steamships with their bare hands. We live in a world where the polar ice cap, the rain forest, and the ozone layer are all shrinking with frightening speed. And, yes, we live in a world where in its most prosperous country, adults working full time, earning something called a minimum wage, cannot minimally support themselves, let alone their families.

Yes, the Talmud teaches us, *zo-he derech ha-olam*, that is the way of the world. Will there not always be distress? Perhaps. But the Talmud also teaches us, *lo alecha hamlacha ligmor v'lo atah ben horin leheebatel mimenu*, it is not your responsibility to see the work is finished, but neither are you free to ignore it. It may be beyond us to correct something completely, but that doesn't matter. God insists we do what we can. God insists, we not be silent.

At this holy moment I ask we each ask ourselves...this year, about what am I going to be not silent?

We enter the Days of Awe. We are aware that we have sinned against God, and for that we pray for God's pardon. We recognize that among those we love, we may have caused hurt and pain, and from them we will ask forgiveness. We acknowledge that, intentionally or not, knowingly or not, the world is a place diminished by our silence, and for that, we will vow to be silent no more.

May the year ahead be a year of good health and prosperity, peace for Israel and the world, a year of contentment for those in want and a year of hope for those who most need it. *Avinu sh'bashamayim*, our Father in Heaven, bless us, our families, our communities and our world, bless us with your grace and goodness. Inspire us to serve you with gladness and delight, and this year, may we serve you with voices, joyous voices filled with spirit, inspiration and love, voices that are anything, anything, but silent.