

June 2020 Message from Rabbi Dubin

Dear Friends,

George Floyd couldn't breathe. Eric Garner couldn't breathe. So many of our brothers and sisters of color haven't been able to breathe at one point or another over the past year, over the past decade, the past century, the past 400 years. How much longer can we continue to bear their suffocation?

Ever since the murder in Minneapolis our country has been crying out for racial justice. It's been necessary, it's been overdue, it's been loud. And it's been messy – so so messy – which is good, because birth is always messy. Maybe, just maybe, we're actually witnessing the birth of a new reality, a reality in which every member of our society will feel equally protected and equally respected.

The cries for racial justice sound familiar, but so too is there something strangely different “this time.” It's hard to pinpoint exactly what that difference is, but surely it does feel different. It's beautiful, it's life affirming, and it's nothing short of a miracle, but it is messy.

Not everyone has been on the same page when it comes to deciding on the next best step. Some want revolutionary change and some want incremental change, but everyone does want change. With different strategies being thrown out, it is hardly a neat and tidy process, but one thing is sure: No one, neither the protestors, nor the police, is prepared to accept the murder of George Floyd without objection. Everyone on every side of the story – save the tiny percentage of those who occupy the far right and far left fringes – strives to live in a country where every citizen-police interaction unfolds with justice as its sole guide.

As we look to the future, let none of us conclude that our current turmoil is about George Floyd alone, or that his death was in any way ground breaking. Let none of us be seduced into thinking that successful prosecution of the former police officers responsible for his murder will be the end of racial injustice in America, because 400 years of lived experience cannot be wiped clean with the conviction of four people. The task before us is gargantuan. The pursuit of justice will not be complete overnight, but it must begin, and we must do what we can to usher it along its way. We pray this time of profound messiness will indeed prove itself to be the birth of a new reality of safety and dignity and equality and justice.

So what are we, the almost entirely white community of the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey, to do? How can we fulfill our prophetic obligation of *tikkun olam*, of helping to heal our world? There are a number of things we might do, of course, but when all is said and done, there is, in my mind, one non-negotiable first step. In order to have any chance of success, the first thing our mostly white community must do is listen to our brothers and sisters of color, because for the clear majority of us, neither we nor those closest to us have ever experienced what it feels like to live life

in black skin. For most of us, we simply don't have the capacity to understand the extent of the challenge.

On that note, allow me to conclude not with my own words, but with a Facebook posting (with permission from the authors) that was put up a few days ago by a college classmate of mine and her teenage son. I cannot possibly share with you what it feels like to live under constant suspicion because of the color of my skin, but Emmett can. Please, I invite all of us to let his words roll over us and permit them to be the necessary catalyst that will equip us to engage in the process that will, finally, effect genuine *tikkun olam*:

At summer camp last year, Emmett was invited to write something — anything — in response to a prompt. No other direction was offered. The prompt was “octopus.” He used it to go deep. What came out of him is beautiful and scary. He was only 15 years old, and THIS is what is on his mind. Please give him a moment. He needs you to know:

Octopus Government

I know, what the hell, let me explain. Each tentacle of the octopus' body is a struggle that brings me and other black people down beneath the waters of society. Tentacle One is the state PD. “We got a code red, pistol in a bag”, “Let me see your ID”. “Is that THC in your PVC?” “You ain't never gettin to no Ivy League, you just gonna sit on the couch.” I swear it just gets worse down south. If you say the wrong words, they'll shoot you in the mouth. Many kids shot outside their grandma's house. Cleopatra lost her son and Lauren London lost her spouse.

Tentacle 2 is the street bias on me. You know, the look you get walking down the street with your shoes that cost three TVs blasting CDs, and everyone expecting the blessing of that last dollar you make is going to Merinos and cheap weed followed by casinos and VVs. This is crazy but when I grow up, I want to be an actor. But is it a factor that my skin is blacker than half of the actors? And just cause I look up to rappers they think I'm a slacker. So now I'm a gangster, cause I don't rap for kids like parappa the rapper? I call it art, thoughts on a page the ingredients together like sriracha and sage, pens open the cage a mind surrounded by a world of rage this stage is now fine and calm, the palms curve while you observe my word. Deep into the water. Into the water I'm swimming with fishes I keep lyrics clean like I'm doing the dishes the rhyming is vicious. You don't understand cookouts where food is delicious the mashed potatoes so damn fluffy emmett why's your hair so freaking scruffy? It's only a part of my culture, the culture you steal like a vulture. Wait I just built up a thought like a sculpture.

L'Shalom,
Rabbi Dubin