Learning from American Jewish History

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5786 Rabbi Barry H. Block

During the civil rights era, Rabbi Eugene Blachschleger of Montgomery, Alabama wrote: "When I shave in the morning, I cannot look at myself in the mirror." The rabbi couldn't bear the reflection of a man who knew that segregation was wrong, but who was prohibited from opposing it by his congregation's leaders, who believed that would negatively impact their position in the community. James Moses provides that stark example in his biography of our own congregation's Rabbi Ira Sanders to illustrate a harsh reality about B'nai Israel's brave rabbi and congregation: "Ira Sanders' activism is better understood when laid side by side with the experiences of his fellow southern rabbis of the era. Concerns over segregationist reprisals against the Jewish community for the activism of its rabbis constrained many southern rabbis during the civil rights movement."[i]

In 2017, I joined a rabbinic civil rights trip to Alabama included Selma's Temple Mishkan Israel. The few congregants who remain pleaded with the visiting rabbis to help them raise funds to keep their synagogue afloat in a town best known for the brave Black Civil Rights leaders, their foot soldiers and allies, who endured violence to secure voting rights. One of us asked the Selma congregants about the local Jewish community's role in those 1965 events. They begged us to understand: Their parents were merchants. Yes, the cause was just, but they feared losing business if they supported it. They described peering from between the curtains as history unfolded without them.

As we left that temple, I told my colleagues, mostly non-southerners, that Little Rock had Jewish merchants, too. The wives of the men who led several Jewish-owned stores here joined the desegregation efforts of the Women's Emergency Committee.[ii] As for Rabbi Sanders, he risked losing much more than customers. Moses documents that the rabbi "ignored the advice of several friends who asked him not to speak lest his life be in jeopardy,"[iii] Sanders did not keep quiet. When I was new in Little Rock, Sonny Cohen, of blessed memory, told me about the time that bomb threats were lodged at both the Temple and Agudath Achim on a Friday morning. The two boards gathered to discuss what to do on Shabbat. Finally, Rabbi Sanders placed his hands on the table, stood up, and said, "Gentlemen, you will have to excuse me. I will be in the pulpit at seven o'clock." Police protection would be provided, not common in that era, but threats to Jewish safety would not silence **this** rabbi.

The Temple in Atlanta and Beth Israel in Jackson were bombed in retribution for civil rights activism. Thankfully, nobody was hurt in either incident, but both

were terrifying. Today, though, like us, folks in Atlanta and Jackson celebrate that their rabbis and congregations stood for justice.

Our Rosh Hashanah liturgy teaches us that the righteousness of those who came before us is central to our repentance. As we hear the second set of shofar calls tomorrow morning, we will recite a series of prayers known as זיכרונות—literally, "remembrances." We ask God to forgive us, not because we are worthy, but on account of our righteous forbears instead. The editors of *Mishkan HaNefesh* explain that these prayers begin with the turning point in the story of Noah and the flood.[iv] After forty days of deluge, after all life had been "wiped off the earth," we read, "God remembered Noah." No, God had not forgotten about Noah and his family, or the animals in the ark. Instead, God recalls Noah's righteousness, and therefore ends the flood, causes the waters to recede, and permits human and animal life to continue.

זיכרונות asks God to be merciful with us because Noah, Abraham and Sarah, and countless generations of our people have been as praiseworthy as they were imperfect. Those prayers also demand that we consider how we might follow their example. Tomorrow, as we anticipate those second shofar calls, we shall pray: "Remember, we are a people of noble ideals; help us to attain them."[v] The unspoken text is: We are the predecessors whose memories future generations may invoke as they seek repentance. The stakes are high. We are called to live in ways that will inspire our successors' righteousness.

Standing up for Judaism's "noble ideals" can be morally complicated. We don't all agree about how or even whether Judaism instructs us to approach issues of our day. Torah demands a righteous society that cares for the stranger, the widow and the orphan, the poor and marginalized of the day. Still, how best to construct a fair society is open to legitimate debate.

In 2025, though, we face an additional concern: Do we sacrifice our safety as American Jews when we publicly object to discrimination and injustice carried out by powerful forces? We are not the first to face such concerns, and neither were those Selma shopkeepers.

Throughout his book, *Fear No Pharaoh: American Jews, the Civil War and the Fight to End Slavery*, Richard Kreitner demonstrates that American Jewish attitudes to slavery reflected those of their neighbors, despite what Kreitner calls "a tradition of antislavery Judaism reaching all the way back to the Torah itself."[vi] Kreitner explains empathetically: "Assimilation in early America, to a large extent, meant assimilation into a slave society. Challenging its norms would have brought severe costs, particularly for vulnerable, often isolated immigrants. For Jews in the

South, not owning slaves 'carried with it social and business disadvantages,' …while in the North support for abolition was discouraged by 'business and trade policy' which 'rendered such avowals inexpedient.' It is hardly surprising that when a people chased over the millennia from one end of the earth to another finally found a refuge, they placed a high value on expediency."[vii] Even with empathy for our predecessors' position, though, don't we **wish** that American Jews had been better than the surrounding culture, disproportionately seeking slavery's end, despite their meager numbers and vulnerability?

American Jews today do not face the vulnerability that our nineteenth century predecessors did, nor do we suffer the level of antisemitism rife in the civil rights era, antisemitism overcome by B'nai Israel's rabbi and members but not by Selma's Jewish merchants. Still, we are understandably concerned about Jewish safety. The ADL has documented a significant increase in American antisemitism over the last decade, first spiking in 2016 and never receding before reaching new heights since October 7th.[viii]

We take security seriously at Congregation B'nai Israel, and well we should. Our approach to security, led by Carol Parham, is dynamic—constantly enhancing our procedures and our security hardware to meet the challenge.

Security, though, is not achieved by silencing voices of Torah, even when the voice we must raise could antagonize powerful state and federal leaders.

What must we say in the face of attempts to whitewash American history, deemphasizing slavery and white supremacy? Whether one believes that America is fundamentally a white supremacist society that must be radically reformed or that America's sins have been exaggerated, the extent of the erasure of history is cause to raise Torah's voice for truth.

What must we say in the face of mass deportation? Advocates for expelling those in this country illegally must grapple with a half million immigrants who had been in this country legally, but were transformed into so-called "illegals," subject to detention and deportation with the stroke of a pen.[ix] Whatever one thinks of that, Torah emphatically demands that we remember the stranger. Let us all insist that each case be handled with due process, examining individual circumstance, even as we demand humane treatment for all detainees and that our country not deport people to unsafe destinations.

And what do we say to our transgender fellow congregants, who are facing unprecedented discrimination, oppression, and fear? At the very least, let each of us declare: We see you. We affirm that God creates each unique person, worthy of God's love and our own.

When we hear the shofar tomorrow, which of our ancestors will intercede for us? Abraham, who stood up to God, when the Holy One threatened to wipe away the innocent of Sodom together with the guilty? Rabbi Sanders and Irene Samuel, who stood up to Orval Faubus in 1957? Or Rabbi Blachschleger, who let fears for his congregants' community standing silence him? And just as importantly, what will those who come after us think of us, when they hear the shofar in their day?

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we hear the shofar's call, let each of us be stirred by the זיכרונות prayers to recall the most righteous of our ancestors. Having all gone astray, let God forgive us on their account. Then, let us stand up for justice like the best and bravest of our people before us. Then, let us be recorded for blessing in the Book of Life for a year of blessing.

Amen.

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[i] James Moses, *Just and Righteous Causes: Rabbi Ira Sanders and the Fight for Racial and Social Justice in Arkansas, 1926-1963*, Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2018, pp. 118-119.
[ii] https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15728coll3/id/20410.
[iii] Moses, p. 130.
[iv] *Mishkan HaNefesh*, New York: CCAR Press, 2015, p. 262.
[v] *Ibid*., p. 267.
[vi] Richard Kreitner, *Fear No Pharaoh: American Jews, the Civil War, and the Fight to End Slavery*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025, p. 828.
[vii] *Ibid*., p. 827.
[viii] See https://www.npr.org/2018/02/27/589279411/anti-defamation-league-report-shows-anti-semitic-incidents-rose-from-2016-to-201 and https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/antisemitic-incident-data-breaks-all-previous-annual-records-2024-fourth.
[ix] Lawrence Hurley, "Supreme Court allows Trump to revoke temporary legal status of 500,00 immigrants from 4 countries," *NBC*, May 30, 2025, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-allows-trump-revoke-legal-status-500000-immigrants-rcna207271.