

“That’s My Struggle, Too”
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For the members of Beth Shir Shalom, please bear with me. I’m going to share a story I told at the High Holy Days:

My wife’s best friend of twenty-eight years, Karen Smith Elstad, died a year ago this past December. Karen was an esteemed attorney and a revered professor of law and one of the smartest people I’ve ever known. That Karen was African-American was background information and only rarely a topic of conversation. Of course it was there when she was discussing her work promoting women of color in private practice and at Southwestern University School of Law, where she was a dean. There were a couple of other occasions when it came up, too. One was during a moms and daughters trip to Palm Springs with my wife, Toby, my daughter, Eden, Karen and her daughter, Kendra. In order to help you envision this story correctly, it’s important that you know that Karen’s husband, Rob, was of Scandinavian background. As a result of their union their daughter, Kendra, has blond, straight hair and a gorgeous complexion. While on the trip to Palm Springs, Kendra tried on swim suits and the salesperson asked her, “Where did you get that incredible tan?!” Kendra pointed to Karen and answered, “My mom.”

On another occasion, Karen and Rob were over for dinner with some of our other friends and, probably because of something that was extant in the news, we were talking about racial profiling. Karen, as on countless other occasions prior and thereafter, was the only African American present. And, as in all of those discussions, everyone who knew Karen was waiting for her perceptions, not because she was African-American but rather because she was Karen. I recall feeling that Karen was unusually silent during that particular conversation. Then again, Karen was often quiet during discussions. When Karen did speak, it was always insightful and usually offered a perspective that had not been present. So, the white, West LA mostly Jewish participants kept talking until, at one point Karen said, “Shut up! You have no idea what it’s like to be black and drive around this city!” From that point forward, the rest of us listened. Karen talked about the times that she’d been pulled over. Sitting there with someone we cared about deeply who recounted instances in which she was a victim of racial profiling, our prior comments were reduced to drivel.

When it comes to such discussions, I still feel that, as a white person, I need to just listen. I don’t know what it’s like to be black in America. As a

Jew, I have similar experiences in my personal history and in my people's history that lead to similar perspectives, but I really don't know what it's like to be black. That means that I respond to the killings/murders/executions of Treyvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Ezell Ford with a strange mixture of empathy and sympathy.

The rest of my sermon that morning was devoted to the reality that for too much of Black America, the after effects of slavery still exist all these decades later and how white America is blind to that reality. Oh, most of us are happy to take some kind of passive responsibility for past evils, but we're not prepared to take on real, active responsibility. We don't want to admit that it IS different for African-Americans when they are driving, or even just walking! We don't want to admit that there are still gross inequities in the personality, tools and opportunities available to school-aged African-American kids compared to their white counterparts. Jesse Jackson others and say that to address these problems and more, African-Americans want a hand up versus a hand out. President Lyndon Johnson said the same thing regarding Affirmative Action in 1965:

"You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say you are free to compete with all the others, and still just believe that you have been completely fair." Now, Affirmative Action programs are on the wane because society, meaning white society, thinks that 50 years is enough time to pro-actively disassemble the vestiges of 200 years of slavery and a century-and-a-half of half-hearted efforts to address the persistent after-effects of slavery.

What Johnson's words mean for us today is that we not only need to tackle racism, we need to tackle indifference. Racism is a disease that promotes indifference. In fact, it thrives on indifference. Racism has an insatiable hunger for indifference. Racism has no place in a society that treats men, women and children of all races, all religious backgrounds, all sexual realities, all economic classes and all citizenship statuses as equal human beings.

That's not our society – yet – and that's why President Obama, speaking as a father and not the President, said that if he had a son he would look like Treyvon Martin. That is why your very own Pastor Scott wore a black hoody on the pulpit after Treyvon was shot and killed. That's why New York's Mayor, Bill de Blasio, who is white, said that he and his wife, who is black, had to have "The Talk" with their son about how to act and react around police. That is why, after the school shooting at Sandy

Hook Elementary School, Pastor Scott reminded the Beth Shir Shalom congregation that the Watts community suffers a Sandy Hook every week!

In Judaism, we act on a series of mandates, commandments, 613 to be exact – 613 times that we are commanded either to act or **not** act in a certain way. Bottom line, that's what makes us Jews. One might think that the so called Ten Commandments are more important than the others. They're not. Their purpose is to form the basis for our system of laws and mandates. One of my students, Kira Saks, said they are like the basic colors on a painter's palette; the rest are variations on those basic colors.

Kira, like her classmates is about to become a Bat Mitzvah and even though she will soon lead the congregation in prayer and deliver her **own** sermon, there are still some things I hope she will learn as her studies continue. For instance, I hope she will learn that there is **one commandment**, not even one of the Ten, which is repeated in the Torah more than any other, 36 times! That commandment is to not oppress the stranger. AND there's a **reason** why we are commanded not to oppress the stranger; it's in our history. The Torah tells us to treat the stranger equally and with kindness because "you were strangers in the land of Egypt". To which I could easily retort, "Uh, uh! Not me! I wasn't in Egypt! I was born in Brooklyn and came to California when I was 12. Been to Egypt once. Saw the pyramids. A poor, disorganized, country, mourning for itself and not even sure what it's lost." But that's not the way Judaism works. As a Jew, I live in **all** time and in **all** Jewish experiences. They are all mine. I "lived" them all in the sense that I have inherited our history. That history is in me, somewhere in the marrow of my bones, in my *kishkes*! I can ignore it, but it comes at the price of becoming disaffected from my own people. I was born into a solidly middle class family (remember the middle class?). Compared with most in the world, or even the country for that matter, I was well off. As a Jew however, part of me could never live fully in that comfort. I am a slavery-to-freedom person, even though I've never been enslaved. I was a slave in Egypt and lived on no wages and at the discretion of my owners. I revolted with Moses against my slave masters and somehow escaped into the wilderness. I was part of the Exile into Babylonia after the Babylonian conquest burned the Temple in 586 BCE. I wept by the waters of Babylon. I fled into a hostile world in which Jews were always "other", strangers after the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed our Temple for a second time. I was the victim of laws that kept Jews in second class citizenship until the 19th century in Europe. I fled the knights of the Crusades and the Inquisitors in Spain and Portugal. I was cut off from employment and education by the Nuremberg laws. I struggled to survive in

one of Hitler's death camps and was forced to make obscene ethical choices in order to maintain that struggle.

That is **all** part of my identity – always. And it can't end there. If knowing that I was a stranger stops there, it leads to a dangerous ethnocentrism. The **real** purpose of knowing that I was a stranger in Egypt and in all lands since is to be an advocate for anyone who is enslaved during **my** time and to do whatever I can to free them. It means that your struggle **must** be my struggle. The struggle of the African-American community to rid themselves of the last remnants of slavery **must be** my struggle. The struggle to end what amounts to the mass incarceration of African-American men, a trend that means 1 in 3 Black men spend some time of their life in prison, a trend that means that African-American men are incarcerated at six times the rate of white men – that's **my** struggle, too. So is the struggle of African-Americans to be free of the assumptions, character assassination and racial profiling made by the police who are supposed to protect them! So is the struggle of Tibetan Buddhists to practice their Buddhism freely. So is the struggle of all the children of war to live in peace and safety. So is the struggle of people who want to be citizens of this country, who already live and act like Americans but are labeled illegals. So is the struggle for fast food workers and all other workers for a real, living wage. So is the struggle to free workers around the world from unethical treatment by American corporations. So is the struggle of Americans who live under the oppression of homelessness. So is the struggle against ethnic cleansing and genocide being waged against the people in the Sudan, Congo, Nigeria, Syria and elsewhere. So is the struggle against the proliferation of liquor stores and check cashing centers in South Central Los Angeles. These are **all my struggles! They must be. I am obligated. Not by some outside Divinity that pulls my strings, but from a decision I make deep within me, using the Divinity planted within me and all other forms of life. I make a choice to make these my struggle, to identify and to act.** As African-American Christians you come to the same decision in a slightly different way. These are your struggles because of your own slavery in an American Egypt. You were all slaves picking cotton and doing housework, belittled on the street when people would call you "boy", humiliated by backdoor entrances, white only lunch counters and hotels and so much more. And your Christianity tells you "*imitateo de*", be like God. Do what Jesus would do. Dr. King made these struggles his own because he had no choice but to walk in Jesus's footsteps. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was right beside him because

of all those Jewish mandates, at first against racial injustice in America and then against the Viet Nam War.

Now it's our turn. I'm going to take a cue from Pastor Bell who addressed Beth Shir Shalom on Friday evening. If we're going to identify with our histories and hear the call not to oppress the stranger because we were strangers in ancient Egypt and America, we can't just get together once a year. There's too much to do! We only get a short time on this planet so every day counts. Rabbi Tarfon said we are not expected to complete the work and we're not free not to do it either! Like it or not, this is the work of moral, decent human beings. We have the potential to do a great deal together. We will remember our slaveries and free all those now who are enslaved, in any way, now. Now is the time. We **shall** overcome. *Si se puede*. Yes we can.