

A Religious Perspective on Los Angeles & The Riot

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(This sermon was given days after the riot following the acquittal of the policemen who arrested and beat Rodney King. The Los Angeles riot lasted from April 29 to May 4, 1992.)

Baruch atta, Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, ha-motsi lechem min ha-arets.

Even though the fires have died down, Los Angeles cannot return to normal. Los Angeles will never be the same. Parts of the city won't look the same. People in the city won't look at each other the same. The memory of anarchy will haunt many Angelinos for a long time to come.

And still, I say, *Baruch atta, Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, ha-motsi lechem min ha-arets.*

What has a blessing before eating got to do with this urgent American crisis?

A lot. For me, reciting the motsi to myself before lunch on Wednesday had everything to do with the crisis in America and the meaning of Judaism. And that's what I intend to talk about tonight: not just Los Angeles (which every one of us has heard and read about so much), but Los Angeles, Judaism, and Jews.

First of all, I want to tell you that as soon as the riots broke out two weeks ago, I had the same felling as I did when the Gulf War ended and Saddam Hussein began his terrible assault on the Kurds.

As a rabbi and a member of the Jewish community, I felt then that something had to be said and done (Which did happen: As some of you will recall, we created a Kurdish Relief Program in Springfield that raised a significant amount of money last April, May, and June), just as I also felt something had to happen in our community as a response to Los Angeles.

Fortunately, I wasn't alone in my feelings, because within days the Union-News carried a letter to the editor from our Jewish Federation's Community Relations Council. We were one of the first, if not the only, community organization to go on public record with our dismay and concern.

And, of course, we had to do that. Jews have to play a prominent role in a crisis like the one unfolding today in America because, to be honest, it is in our best interests.

Fairness in our society is better for us than unfairness. Justice is better than injustice because what hurts one minority in America is ultimately bound to hurt us.

Prejudice is a disease, and if the bug bites African Americans, you can be sure that sooner or later it won't stop with them. The hate will turn to us. We will get hurt unless we take precautions to protect ourselves and those just in front of us in the line for hate.

By the same token, chaos is also never good for Jews. When the going gets rough, it can easily become doubly rough for us. We have a stake, in a successful America, which means that wherever America fails, we had better be there.

It's smart to protect America. It's prudent to fight whatever threatens American democracy and stability.

But, but, but...As much as Jewish self-interest dictates our participation in the healing of America, something else also makes us ache when we see what happened in Los Angeles. I believe we care about the tragedy of urban America because of our values. I believe we care because of our religious tradition.

Indeed, as I understand it to be a religious duty...A MITZVAH...to light Sabbath candles or hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, I understand it to be a mitzvah for us to be involved in the awesome tasks of healing, or at least soothing, America.

In the same way that last week's Torah portion mingled the call for Sabbath observance with the call to practice tzedekah, my understanding of Judaism sees it as a grand amalgam of all human concern.

It is religious for you to be here at Temple tonight, and it is also religious for you or me to tutor a disadvantaged child.

The two are interrelated; the two activities are two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other.

As Jews, we needn't have one with the other.

Just think of the great religious event each of us participated in only last month. It was the Seder.

In the narrowest sense of the word, the Seder was religious if religious only means performing rituals like reciting the proper blessings before eating the maror or karpas. But in the broadest sense, the Seder is also religious if we consider what the Seder teaches.

Do you remember the words of the Haggadah? "In every generation each of us should feel as if we ourselves had been slaves in Egypt." OR how about this call to action: "This is the bread of affliction. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need feel welcome at our table. This year we are free. Next year may all be free."

It is religious to read those texts. It is religious to take them seriously. It is Jewish and religious to act on those texts.

Those who feel like the biblical prophet Jeremiah that a fire of conscience burns within their bones are religious.

It's for that reason I decided that as important as it was for Federation to have spoken, it wasn't sufficient. A religious consciousness hadn't yet been articulated. Though Jews had responded, Judaism hadn't yet been heard. And the truth is that without Judaism, without the "religious" component of our tradition, there really would be no substance to our lives.

This, then, is what I did as a religious Jew over the last few days. First, I participated in the deliberations of the Interfaith Council of Western Massachusetts which brings together religious Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. We planned a meeting of white religious leaders with black religious leaders for the near future.

Secondly, I went to visit a black clergyman with whom I had already begun to establish a friendship during the winter. We spent an hour beginning to sketch out a program that will helpfully bring our two congregations into contact with each other in the near future.

Third and most importantly, I decided I very much wanted the rabbis of Springfield to create a written statement of our own. It didn't have to "improve" on the Federation statement. But something had to come out of Jewish sources and the religious sector of our community so that Judaism could speak fully and clearly both to non-Jews and Jews.

Coming from the rabbis, the statement, I felt, would not be just another political commentary. It would suggest to Jews and non-Jews that Judaism at its best is righteous while religious, that to be religious is to be righteous, that to be righteous is to be religious.

So I turned to the rabbis and convened a meeting Wednesday morning in which we shaped the statement out of traditional Jewish sources and into 1992. We quoted the Book of Leviticus, the Book of Jeremiah, and the Mishnah.

We also debated: Was our focus to be the trial verdict and its provocative effects OR was our focus to be on the riots and their pointlessness and lawlessness? Could we, six men with widely divergent perspectives, come together on this one item at all?

To tell the truth, at one point it appeared we wouldn't. With several of us in the room writing, one sick at home, one at another meeting, on the telephone and then on the phone again, we put together a few sentences and then almost hit a snag over the word "unjust."

Would that word be used to describe the acquittal of the policeman? Although disappointing, were we sure the verdict was "unjust."

On the other hand, if we didn't speak specifically about injustice, how would African Americans read our statement? If we were balanced and didn't attack the verdict in any way, blacks in our community would almost certainly be insulted. It would be like using the Holocaust as an example of general racism. Jews would object to that as African Americans would object to no reference to the injustice their fundamental situation.

At length, we did reach an accommodation and this is what we wrote:

*"Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor." Leviticus 19:16
In response to Jewish tradition and in response to the tragedy which swept Los Angeles in the wake of the Rodney King verdict, we express our sorrow. We mourn the injustice. We mourn the loss of life. We join hands with those who seek national healing and urge the citizens of Springfield to understand that the violent anger expressed in Los Angeles was symptomatic of a deeper despair in America's urban centers. Recognizing the failure of current and past urban policies, we ask others to join us in addressing the crisis that affects our country today. As Hillel, the great Jewish sage, taught us, we should not, and cannot, separate ourselves from the needs of the larger community. A fire of conscience burns within each of us - even as it burned within Jeremiah (20:9). The time for action is now.*

By mid-morning one of our number volunteered to type up the statement and take it to the newspaper, where I do hope it will appear tomorrow possibly in the religion section. I myself headed back to the Temple for an appointment preceded by a quick sandwich, which brings me back to the Motti Blessing.

That was the motsi with which I began this evening and that is the motsi I recited when I felt so very pleased Wednesday afternoon. Not because our statement will change the world. It certainly won't.

And yet I was pleased and proud because the right thing had been done. A religious voice had spoken out. Judaism had made us do the right thing.

The same Judaism that doesn't take food for granted had said don't take freedom for granted. The same Judaism that says recite a prayer had say something about this issue. The same Judaism that said eating can be a holy act had said creating a decent society is also a holy act.

It's strange. I have developed the habit of reciting the mosti when I eat. Often I don't even think much about it as I whisper the prayer to myself. But on Wednesday afternoon it mattered. It mattered because in that simple prayer I saw my Judaism and my concern for justice come together. They are one and the same. They make me thankful for being a Jew. They make me proud that once upon a time the religious giants of the past created this great tradition I have inherited.

Ashrenu...How happy we are. How blessed we are with a Judaism that sanctifies our lives even as it helps us sanctify all life around us.