

Declare a State of Moral Emergency

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By Peter Geffen

Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, but I am responsible. Sixty years ago Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel pointed to the reality of our moral situation then. His words ring truer today than ever: "In a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible." I did not kill George Floyd, that Minneapolis policeman did. I did not set fire to those buildings or that police car, urban terrorists did. I did not loot and steal from that Target and Supermarket, anonymous rioters did. Yes, "some are guilty, (but) all are responsible." Dr. King was once asked about endangering the lives of "innocent bystanders" when he led a march that he knew would encounter violence, as in Selma. His answer was quite simple and direct: "the term is an oxymoron, for if you are a by-stander, you cannot be innocent." Rabbi Heschel, King's friend and close associate in the leadership of the movement against the War in Vietnam

understood the insidious nature of evil. "There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted."

We are facing a moment in America that will determine the future of our country and possibly the whole world. We have done exactly what Heschel predicted and our silence, our not-so-well-meaning passivity has now allowed a pervasive evil to erupt around us and begin to consume us in its fire, both literally and figuratively. The timing of this moment cannot be more poignant or laden with irony. Exposed to a virus ravaging the entire world, we are now confronting a disease far more contagious and deadly: racism. And once again we are unprepared. The masques we have been wearing for many years do not protect us from the truth. As Heschel said: "One hundred (and fifty+) years ago the emancipation was proclaimed. It is time for the white man to strive for self-emancipation, to set himself free of bigotry, to stop being a slave to wholesale contempt, a passive recipient of slander."

Heschel understood the insidious power of self-delusion. We all experience it. We all are confident in our inherent ability to behave morally to all and in our consistent refusal to cause harm to others. We are good people. Why should we be guilty for one or 100 acts of racially motivated injustice? Again, Heschel stops us in our tracks: "That equality is a good thing, a fine goal, may be generally accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of inequality."

Dr. King understood this same insidious temptation: "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it." He continued: "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

Almost 57 years ago, (June 16, 1963) Heschel sent the following telegram to President John F. Kennedy in response to an invitation from JFK to attend a meeting of religious leaders at the White House to discuss the then growing racial tensions in the country:

I look forward to privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow. Likelihood exists that Negro problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church synagogue have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month's salary toward fund for Negro housing and education. I propose that you Mr. President declare state of moral emergency. A Marshall plan for aid to Negroes is becoming a necessity. The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.

Once again history has caught up with us. We cannot escape. Each of must enter our own hearts and decide which side we are on, there is no longer a middle ground. Our country will not heal until we listen to our black and brown fellow citizens who have consistently been left out of the progress and prosperity we acclaim as the birthright of our nation. We must finally look into our private and collective mirrors and confront what we have done. We have built our success at the expense of other human beings.

We have allowed little black children to drink contaminated water so our corporations could save money for their shareholders. We have filled our shelves with food beyond our needs while those same children go to bed hungry each night in city after city. We have instructed our police to stop and frisk our African-American fellow citizens just because their skin is dark. We have forced a generation of "successful" dark skinned men and women to instruct their children to put their hands on the

dashboard if stopped for a traffic violation for fear of being shot. What has become of us?

On April 9, 1968, Mickey Shur and I, two civil rights workers in our early 20's marched through the streets of Atlanta behind the coffin of Dr. Martin Luther King, jr. Earlier that morning we had been assigned to bring one of the mules for the mule-train that carried Dr. King's body from the Ebenezer Baptist Church to Morehouse College and to his first burial site. We walked beside our teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and then Presidential hopeful, Robert F. Kennedy. Stunned by King's assassination and terrified of what it would mean for the future, I asked: "Rabbi Heschel, what are we to do now?" He kept walking and turned back and said simply: "You must teach the children, you must teach them a Judaism that can remake the world."

Our job now, all of us of all religions and belief systems in this country, must prove to ourselves and our children that we can remake the world into a better reality, providing, caring for and sharing more equitably with all. The era of selfishness and greed must finally come to an end and allow a spirit of compassion and empathy to enter our hearts and fill our homes, our streets, our schools, our workplaces and our houses of worship and our politics and political leaders with a new spirit. We must renew America in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln's immortal words "that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

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