

D'var for Boston Workers Circle
YOM KIPPUR 5781
Rochelle Ruthchild | September 28, 2020

SHANA TOVAH. I am deeply honored to be asked to give the d'var at the Boston Workers Circle Yom Kippur service. My name is Rochelle; my birth surname is Goldberg, but in the seventies, after a failed marriage to a man, and deep involvement in the feminist movement, I changed my name to Ruthchild after my mother Ruth. I am a longtime member of Boston Workers Circle, a lesbian mother and grandmother, and the widow of A BESERE VELT chorus member Vicki Gabriner.

I was born in 1940 and my life has been deeply informed by the Holocaust. I was very lucky to have been born in the U.S. and am very aware that if I had been born as a Jew in Belarus or Poland, the homes of my ancestors, I likely would have wound up dead in a ditch. My grandparents came here in the early 1900s and at first were considered "other," alien. But gradually Eastern European Jews became white. That meant that my family and other Jews from similar backgrounds partook of white privilege. I do not mean to minimize the continued existence of anti-Jewish racism, or its recent resurgence. But I also want to acknowledge the ways in which I benefited from being classified as white. For example, my family could move to the suburbs, where I graduated from Levittown High School. Levittown, Long Island was the first massive U.S. suburban development. Supposedly this was a way to provide housing for returning GIs, but Levittown was closed to African-American veterans. And the government enabled this segregation by approving federal housing mortgages with no objection to the racial covenant. Levittown set the pattern for the housing segregation which is still so much a part of U.S. suburbs.

On Yom Kippur we reflect on what we have done during the year, and what we could have done better. We reflect, atone, and repent. Judaism emphasizes the importance of a person taking responsibility for her actions. But what about those who can't or won't take responsibility, who are *atone* deaf? On a national level, we can respond by voting out such a person and his collaborators in a landslide and then keeping up the pressure for progressive reform. The Black Lives Matter movement has prodded a long overdue examination of white privilege and white

supremacy. How can we in our own lives, as individuals and as Jews, combat the racism that is so deeply embedded in our society?

One way is to acknowledge and recognize that not all Jews are white. As my friend Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz so perceptively wrote in her book *The Colors of Jews*, we must challenge the assumptions that: “all Jews came from Eastern Europe and spoke Yiddish, that Jewishness is only religion; that secular Judaism is a contradiction in terms; that real Jews are born Jewish. That calling (all) Jews ‘white’ explains anything. That calling (all) Jews people of color explains anything. The assumption that American Jews and African Americans used to be best friends and are now enemies, that Jews and Arabs were always enemies and could never be friends. Or that life in the diaspora has always been a vale of tears that all Jews aspire to escape.”

One hundred and twenty years ago, the then Workmen’s Circle was founded, its motto *shenere un besere velt far ale* — a better and more beautiful world for all. I have been drawn to the Workers Circle because it is a modern incarnation of the long Jewish tradition of calling out inequity and fighting for social justice, and of repairing the world, Tikkun Olam. Judaism affirms individual atonement but also atonement as a group, hence our coming together as a community to reflect on the past year and what our actions have meant.

These times, with so many crimes and horrors—climate change, an economic recession moving into depression, a pandemic, demonization of immigrants, the rise of fascism and authoritarianism, growing misogyny, the scourge of systemic racism, police brutality – most recently the failure to indict three police for the murder of Breonna Taylor—cry out for protest and work for change.

Change takes time, but we must not give up hope. I have marched for civil rights, Women’s liberation, to take back the night, LGBT rights, against war, for Palestinian rights, for Soviet Jewish emigration, for indigenous rights, for the environment, Black Lives Matter, in two Women’s Marches, and most recently in support of Belarussians protesting their rigged election. My first protest was in Rochester against systemic racism in housing, in 1964. I have scattered chicks at the office of a local radio station to protest their calling women chicks. In 1971 I participated in the occupation of a Harvard building for 10 days, demanding affordable housing, a women’s center, accessible 24-hour childcare, equal rights,

reproductive rights and an end to negative media stereotypes of women. The occupation of the building, the subject of the film LEFT ON PEARL, took place almost fifty years ago, but the relevance of its demands is still with us today. It often takes a great deal of time to make substantive change. And social protest is critical in forcing that change.

This year has seen the loss in this country of two giants in the fight for social justice, John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Both recognized that the fight is a long one. John Lewis advocated for making “good trouble.” He said: “You've got to make some noise, you got to be willing to move....You have to have hope and you got to stay in motion.”

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Notorious RBG, died right before Rosh Hashanah. As Nina Totenburg tweeted: “There is a Jewish teaching that says that those who die just before the Jewish New Year are the ones God has held back until the last moment because they were needed most and were the most righteous.”

During her long career, RBG recognized the need to fight, but to fight strategically, declaring: “Fight for the things that you care about. But do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” As she said in reflecting on what shaped her life, “The demand for justice runs through the entirety of Jewish history.”

Recalling the five-thousand-year-old cry from the Bible, in DEUTERONOMY, of “Justice, Justice, ye shall pursue,” with the word “justice” repeated twice for emphasis, let us go forth in the new year, perhaps adding: “Justice, Justice Ginsburg, ye shall pursue.”

The sound of the shofar calls us to reflect and renew ourselves for the coming year. Our individual pursuit of the common good may be as simple as voting; but circumstances may call us to do much more. Let us use this day of reflection to consider our individual actions and the ways in which we, as a Boston Workers Circle community, can pursue justice, racial, economic, gender, social, in 5781.