

Temple Sinai's Civil Rights Tour
02.16.23—02.19.23
Reflections by Marsha Stiefel Pinson

A week ago tonight, I returned to Washington from the Civil Rights Tour. It was an unforgettable journey from Atlanta, GA, to Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham in AL, and back again to Atlanta. True, we covered many miles and even a time zone in 3 days; but it was the history we traversed that drained me. Our tour guides enhanced our stops with information and thoughtful insights into the sites and the people we would encounter. Cantor Croen and Rabbi Goldstein also brought us unforgettable spiritual moments, and it was our spirits that needed support.

Boarding the busses at 7:00 a.m. on Friday morning, I felt an uneasy anticipation as to what our long day in Montgomery would bring. It brought everything from revisiting my memories from a troubled time in America at the Rosa Parks Museum, to learning about shocking history at the EJI Memorial for Peace and Justice (aka the Lynching Memorial), to dreadful facts passionately related at the Mothers of Gynecology Monument, to the warm embrace and comfort of Shabbat Services at Beth Or. Just coming into Montgomery evokes the scenes of George Wallace clinging to segregation on the steps of the state Capitol and Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking nearby, at the end of a long and dangerous March from Selma. Driving by the bus stop where Rosa Parks boarded a bus before being arrested for not giving up her seat, and passing the center of town where people were bought and sold, I saw markers to remind us of the history. But, I wondered what the people of Montgomery thought of the purposeful tourism that brings people and money to their town because of their dark history? The Lynching Memorial is an indescribable gut-punch of an experience filling a large grassy hill with visceral reminders of more than 800 counties in the United States where “documented racial terror lynchings took place.” Walking up to the center, where over 800 rusted steel monuments hang, left me reeling. Described as a “sacred space for truth-telling and reflection” the time spent there was unforgettable. The afternoon took us to The Legacy Museum, which immersed me in the history in a challenging, interactive way, beginning with the sensation that I was in a ship bringing captives to America. I then moved through the powerful exhibits which recounted stories of the enslaved through the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era and entrenched racial segregation, finally resulting in mass incarceration. The museum utilized technology to “introduce” me to people who were enslaved and also with some who are incarcerated, who “speak” to me as if I am a visitor in a jail. The man I “met” when I picked up a phone on my side of the glass, just wanted to tell me his story. The Museum ends with places for reflection and a display of many kinds of art that emanate from the experiences of African Americans who have witnessed and endured enslavement of many kinds. Isn't prison another denial of freedom?

Shabbat Services with a welcoming, if small Congregation, and their familiar tunes and tropes, offered a welcome respite—a chance to let peace arrive with Shabbat. This was followed by a Southern comfort meal at Martha's Place —run by an 82 year-old woman well regarded in the Montgomery community. Sadly, she was not able to meet with us; however, the traditional Southern food resonated anyway.

The next morning, we drove to Selma, solemnly watching the 54 miles roll by, while imagining the brave people, who, on March 7, 1965, were marching for voting rights. Many religious leaders from all over the country had come to Selma to help Martin Luther King, Jr. and the other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Once in Selma, we were honored to meet with JoAnne Blackmon Bland, who was 11 years old when she crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Her booklet, “Stories of Struggle: Growing Up in

the Segregated South,” expands the insights she shared with us. To her, as a little girl, freedom meant sitting on a stool at Carter’s Drug Store, eating ice cream like white people. Her grandmother told her that was not an option for her. She marched to be able to sit on a stool like other children. As our time came to a close, Cantor Croen and Rabbi Goldstein recited the Threefold Blessing over JoAnne in word and song, which was one of the most spiritual moments I have ever experienced. It was a sad honor to be present.

Then, it was our turn to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge—named for a terrible racist—and so evocative of many memories and photos that captured them. John Lewis, in this era of removing offensive statues and names across the South, felt strongly that the Bridge should NOT be renamed because of its important place in history and the tragic violence that occurred there. I agree with that position: Would I want Auschwitz to get a sanitized name? Some history must not be denied. As I walked across the bridge, I wished that my grown children had been there with me. Our trip did have some families and even 3 generations within them. The V’ahavta demands that we impart our values and beliefs to our children. Mine know their history; but still, I wished we could have shared this experience. A friend had suggested that I watch “Selma” before embarking on the trip, which I did. It was, however altered by Hollywood, a powerful depiction of dark days. Throughout our travels, our guides shared insights to deepen the experiences. I would not have wanted to make the trip without their insights.

The ride to Birmingham was quiet and our time there, while short, was very moving. I had visited the powerful Birmingham Civil Rights Institute a few years before and recalled that the last room was devoted to President Obama. I remembered thinking we had made such progress in this country when he was elected. In some ways we had but...now? 89-year-old Bishop Calvin Wallace Woods, Sr., who is honored in Freedom Park where we gathered, regaled us with his memories of the struggle for civil rights and inspired us with his songs and charm. Once again, I could walk the storied park, just across the street from the 16th Street Baptist Church, where 4 little girls were killed in a bombing, but with a fuller heart.

Sunday morning, thankfully took us to The Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King, Jr.’s father preached (in its original location across the street). We were in the neighborhood where King was born and now is in his final resting place with his wife at the King Center. Their tombs sit in a pool that includes Amos: “WE WILL NOT BE SATISFIED UNTIL JUSTICE ROLLS DOWN LIKE WATER AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE A MIGHTY STREAM.” In the church, we were welcomed again and again and the music was wondrous. The messages of the day began with asking us to pray for native son, Jimmy Carter, whose grandson, Jason, is a member and was present to share in our heartfelt prayers. It was a very moving moment. The sermon was a beautiful message of unity and responsibility, as revealed in the Zulu word Ubuntu: “I am, because you are.” Reverend Warnock was in Alabama to preach. But being in the church he leads, this honorable man who also serves as a Senator of the United States, I was especially sorry to think that he was almost defeated by another man of color but not of character. And this really was part of the hard truth for me as the trip moved from place to place.

Our final gathering began with revisiting the history of Leo Frank, a Jew from the North, lynched in 1915, after being falsely accused and convicted of murdering a young woman employed in the pencil factory where he was superintendent. Prejudice against Jews and “uppity” Northerners led to his killing which left its mark on the Jewish Community of Atlanta. Our Guides said, yes, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and other Jews walked with Martin Luther King, Jr. from Selma to Montgomery; however, there were Jews on the other side of the bridge, too, standing against the marchers. The Leo Frank story gave

context to the precariousness that some Jews felt in society and why some felt unable to support the civil rights movement. This focus at the end of our trip was a thorny question to ponder—especially from 59 years later.

And as I headed home, this was the dark overlay of my profoundly sad trip. 59 years later, hate is on the rise; voting rights have been rolled back and threatened for minorities; Anti-Semitism is again a threat to Jews; teaching African American studies and history are limited in many States; violence is a daily option; and justice is delayed. I unpacked my bags but cannot shake the baggage of this moving, disturbing, warning trip. Our country's laundry is VERY dirty and too many people want to go backwards, not forward to "the promised land." Still, I was very grateful for the opportunity to go on Temple Sinai's Tour and to go with a community of caring partners.

Going during February, Black History Month, has meant that a number of meaningful programs or articles have new impact. An OpEd from the Washington Post on Friday, 02.17, written by Dante Stewart, was titled, "My kids need to know that Black is brilliance. So we go to Museums." He described taking his children to Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum in Montgomery. He was not prepared for the way he felt and called his mother, who had taken her children to museums, "not to remind us of our enslavement, but to reveal our humanity." He called his mother after the visit to ask why she had felt it important to take them to museums. "'History is being whitewashed, son,' she said. 'We need to know so that we don't repeat the same mistake.' But at *we*, she corrected herself: '*Other* people need to know where we fit in, and y'all needed to learn how a group of people facing adversity...can rise above that.'" As a daughter of Holocaust survivors, her words had real resonance for me...coming in the Washington Post on the very day I, too, visited Montgomery.