

Feeling That Black Lives Don't Matter

A Rabbi Joins the Frontline of the Protest in Ferguson

By [Rachel Kahn-Troster](#)

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Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel taught us that on three things the world is sustained: on truth, on justice and on peace.

Pirkei Avot 1:18:

רַבֵּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (זְכַרְיָה ח, טז) אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם שְׁפֹטוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: On three things the world stands: on judgment, and on truth, and on peace, as it is said (Zachariah 38:16): "Truth and the justice of peace judge in your gates."

But today the streets have erupted in protest — in Ferguson, Missouri, and around the country — because a clear truth, that an unarmed black teenager named Michael Brown Jr., was shot and killed in broad daylight by a police officer, has not lead to justice. And so there is no peace on the streets, because once again, black and brown youth in the United States have been shown by the system of justice that is supposed to serve all of us that their lives do not matter.

In America today, it should not be this way. All lives matter. That's the first message the Torah gives us about human beings, when it tells us that every human being is created b'tzelem elohim, in the image of God.

Genesis 1:27:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And God created the human in God's own image, in the image of God created God the human; male and female God created them.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5:

כיצד מאימין (את העדים) על עדי נפשות. ... לפיכך נברא אדם יחיד, ללמדך, שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו אבד עולם מלא. וכל המקים נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו קים עולם מלא. ומפני שלום הבריות, שלא יאמר אדם לחברו, אבא גדול מאביך....

How do we press the witnesses in a capital case? ... (The judges' speech continues:) "It was for this reason that a human was first created as one person (viz. Adam), to teach you that anyone who destroys a life (some editions: from Israel) is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; any any who saves a life (some editions: from Israel) is as if he saved an entire world." [And also, to promote peace among the creations, that nobody would say to his/her friend, "My ancestors are greater than yours." ...] ...

This should not be an abstract concept: We are all sacred; each of us is someone's child. But I don't think I truly understood how little these points matter in real life until this past October, when I sat in a church in Ferguson with several hundred other clergy and was asked to imagine that instead of Brown, it was my child lying dead on the ground for four hours, shot by police.

I'm the mother of two young children, and as I took part in this chilling exercise, two thoughts flashed in my mind. The first was that if as Jews we really believe that all lives matter, we are obligated to speak out against a system of violence in which someone's child is shot by a police officer every 28 hours. And the second was that as a white parent, the reality was it would be someone else's child. And that is a horrible truth in America today. Every parent has a right to a world in which his or her child can grow up in safety, and every parent certainly has a right not to fear that the police will be the ones who violate that safety.

Much of the media coverage following the decision of the grand jury not to indict the officer, Darren Wilson, has focused on the unfortunate violence and looting of a small number of protesters. This is a distraction; when faced with yet another example of why their lives matter less than other lives, we are asking the oppressed to be nicer in their response. Rather than pass judgment, it is critically important that we listen to what the protesters are saying.

Anger on the part of the community is justified. We would be angry, too, if our youth could be shot by police with no consequences at all. As Jews, we have a duty to engage with the systemic concerns about police violence and accountability that the Ferguson protesters have been raising since Brown was killed this past summer. We must stand in solidarity with those echoing the prophetic call of Malachi: Have we not all one parent? Has not one God created us?

Malachi 2:10:

הֲלוֹא אֶב אֶחָד לְכָלֵנוּ הֲלוֹא אֵל אֶחָד בְּרָאֵנוּ מִדּוּעַ נִבְגַּד אִישׁ בְּאָחִיו לְחַלֵּל בְּרִית אֲבוֹתֵינוּ.

Have we not all one parent? Hath not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, profaning the covenant of our fathers?

We can't wait for moments of crisis to speak out. Last summer, as Rabbi Susan Talve of Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis, stood on the front lines with protesters, she [reminded all of us](#) that she could engage in this struggle for justice — for better wages, for better schools, for an end to the cycle of poverty — precisely because she had already been showing up. The relationships they built through shared struggle meant that when violence came to their community, they could not stand idly by the blood of their neighbors.

Leviticus 19:16:

לֹא תִלְךָ רֵכִיל בְּעַמֶּיךָ לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל דַּם רֵעֶךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה.

Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people; neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbour: I am the LORD.

As Talve wrote: “This is personal for the Jewish community because these are our children.... Our work is to move the margins to the center.... We will use what we have to be part of the solution.”

What does that solution look like for the Jewish community as a whole? In her “[Prayer for Ferguson](#),” rabbinical student Sandra Lawson issues us a challenge: “We are commanded to not harden our hearts or shut our hand against our brothers or sisters who are in need. These men who have died are part of us; they are our brothers. The people protesting in the streets of Ferguson are our brothers and sisters. They are part of us, and part of our community. We must speak out to stop racial profiling and we must rid ourselves of the myth that what happens in Ferguson or on the streets of our own cities doesn't affect us.”

As young people of color continue to die at the hands of police, those of us who do nothing cannot pretend that our failure to engage is benign. A midrash teaches that we say to ourselves in times of action: “‘What have the affairs of society to do with me? Why should I trouble myself with the people's voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace!’ — If one does this, they overthrow the world.” [Midrash Tanchuma Mishpatim 2]

Our commitment must be to build a new world of kavod habriyot, human dignity. In a [video](#) released in early November by Hands Up United, one young activist declares, “I don't want to see a better tomorrow, I want to see a better forever.” That is the promise we must make, for our children and for everyone's children.

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<http://truah.org/resources-91356/prayers/631-a-prayer-for-ferguson.html>

A Prayer for Ferguson

by Rabbinical Student Sandra Lawson

Help us to lie down, Dear Lord our God, in peace, and let us rise again, to life...

<p>From the evening service</p> <p><u>Help us to lie down, Dear Lord our God, in peace,</u> and let us rise again to life. <u>Spread over us the shelter of Your peace. And inspire us you're Your good counsel and save us for the sake of your name.</u> Protect us and keep from us enemies, illness, sword, famine and sorrow. <u>Shield us in the wings of Your protection,</u> for you are our redeeming guardian. Truly, a sovereign, gracious and compassionate God are you. <u>Guard our going out and our coming in, for life and peace, now and forever.</u> Spread over us the shelter of your peace.</p> <p><u>Blessed are You Compassionate One, who spreads your canopy of peace over all Your people Israel, over Jerusalem and over the entire world.</u></p>	<p>הַשְּׂכִיבֵנו ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְשָׁלוֹם, וְהַעֲמִידֵנוּ מִלְּכָנוּ לְחַיִּים . וּפְרוֹשׁ עָלֵינוּ סֶכֶת שְׁלוֹמְךָ. וְתִקְּנֵנוּ בְּעֵצָה טוֹבָה מִלְּפָנֶיךָ . וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ. וְהִגֵּן בְּעַדְנוּ : וְהִסֵּר מֵעָלֵינוּ אוֹיֵב דָּבָר וְחָרֵב וְרָעַב וְיָגוֹן . וְהִסֵּר שָׁטָן מִלְּפָנֵינוּ וּמֵאַחֲרֵינוּ. וּבְצֵל כְּנָפֶיךָ תִּסְתִּירֵנוּ . כִּי אֵל שׁוֹמְרָנוּ וּמְצִילָנוּ אַתָּה. כִּי אֵל מֶלֶךְ חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אַתָּה : וְשׁוֹמֵר צִאתָנוּ וּבּוֹאָנוּ לְחַיִּים וּלְשָׁלוֹם מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם : בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' שׁוֹמֵר עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעַד:</p>
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This summer, I heard that a young black man had been killed by a police officer. The sad thing is that I tuned the story out. I was too caught up in whatever I was doing to notice that another unarmed black man had been killed by a police officer. I kept seeing the name Ferguson flash across my Twitter feed and my Facebook page, and I assumed that the name of the individual who was killed was Ferguson. Then I noticed that the individual's name was Michael Brown and the shooting happened in a place that I know too well. It happened in Ferguson, Missouri.

Spread over us the shelter of Your peace...

From the ages of five through twelve I lived on the border of Berkeley and Ferguson. I spent a lot of time in Ferguson hanging with my friends Jill and Stacey. I remember swimming in January-Wabash park, bike riding adventures where the plan was to get lost and struggle to find our way home, and spending my allowance on arcade games. I moved away when I was twelve and I was devastated--I loved my life and I loved my friends. At the age of seventeen I moved back to the area and reconnected with my friends but it wasn't the same.

and inspire us with Your good counsel...

Sadly, until recently I hadn't given much thought to that part of my life. When I learned what happened to Michael Brown and where the shooting took place all of those memories of my childhood came flooding back. I immediately started reading as much information as I could find on what happened. A frightening feeling came over me and I realized that Michael Brown could easily have been the son of someone I went to school with. I reached out to friends and I talked with my parents.

and save us for the sake of Your name...

The recent events in Ferguson have brought a lot of attention to the issues of race in our society. Every single person of color in my life, including me, has had a moment of either being followed around in a store because of the perception that we might shoplift, or a moment of someone being afraid of us on the street or in an elevator. Once, when I walked into a sauna, and a white woman with a terrified look on her face yelled for me to get out because she assumed I was a black man. We live in a culture where we are bombarded by images that depict black men as threats. We live in a society that has become more segregated, not necessarily because of laws, but because of class and choices. It's an indescribable feeling to see a place I loved as a child, and hated to leave, on the national news with scenes that invoke in me images of Bull Connor's attempt to control massive amounts of young black protesters with attack dogs and fire hoses. But today, instead of dogs, it's tear gas and weapons used for war.

and shield us in the wings of Your protection,

I live in two worlds. I am Jewish and I am black, and I am calling out to the Jewish community to please take notice of these past events, not just the events in Ferguson but the number of black men and people of color in our society who are stopped by police, arrested by police and even killed by police. Many in the Jewish community believe that these issues do not concern us, but they do. American Jews are now more racially diverse than ever. Every Shabbat many of us sit next to a Jews of color in our synagogues. Many of us have children of color, many of us have people of color in our families and many of us are black. We as a Jewish community can no longer say these issues do not concern us.

Guard our going out and our coming in, for life and peace, now and forever

As American Jews we know the history of injustice. We cannot sit by and let injustice happen because we know that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. —*Martin Luther King, Jr, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"*

We are commanded to not harden our hearts or shut our hand against our brothers or sisters who are in need.

Deuteronomy 15:7:

כִּי יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֶבְיֹן מֵאַחַד אַחֵיךָ בְּאַחַד שַׁעְרֵיךָ בְּאַרְצֶךָ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ לֹא תִאֲמַץ אֶת לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת יָדְךָ מֵאַחֵיךָ הָאֶבְיֹן.

If there be among you a needy man, one of thy brethren, within any of thy gates, in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy needy brother;

These men who have died are part of us; they are our brothers. The people protesting in the streets of Ferguson are our brothers and sisters. They are part of us and part of our community. We must speak out to stop racial profiling and we must rid ourselves of the myth that what happens in Ferguson or on the streets of our own cities, doesn't affect us.

Blessed are You Compassionate One, who spreads your canopy of peace over all Your people Israel, over Jerusalem and over the entire world.

- See more at: <http://truah.org/resources-91356/prayers/631-a-prayer-for-ferguson.html#sthash.WdLoGY65.dpuf>