

Snapshots of Freedom

Shabbat Shalom everyone! Thank you Forrest for that kind introduction, and thanks to all of you for welcoming me into your congregation. I have many friends from this community and Minneapolis and I'm glad that I finally get the chance to visit – and in the warm month of January, too! I'm excited to spend the weekend getting to know all of you, explore the challenges facing our world, and celebrating Shabbat together.

Like all of us here, I have a story. Some of our stories feature our families, or parts of history, or values that we hold deep. My story tonight features all of those aspects through some very specific and connected snapshots. If I were to tell you that my Dad is a 6'3 Black man from Okmulgee, Oklahoma and my Mom is a 5'4 White, Jewish woman from Wilmington, Delaware, that would be interesting enough, right? But surprisingly, I think I have a bit more to share with you tonight!

While I've always known that my family and I were unique in the Jewish community, I only truly started to explore and unpack my experience as a Jew of Color over the past couple of years. And with that exploration has come a stronger attachment to my family, some feelings of anger and distrust, and a strengthened commitment to social justice and making our world a better place. The snapshots that make up my story as a half-Black, half-White Reform Jew from Oklahoma do not begin with my life starting on April 2nd, 1994; these snapshots of struggle, but most importantly of freedom, have been centuries in the making.

My first snapshot to share with you all tonight begins in North Carolina during a dark period in our country's history. The institution of slavery in the United States was first and foremost a system of White people holding power over Black people. This power displayed itself through many ways, including harassment, enslavement, murder, and in the case of my family, sexual dominance. My great-great-great-grandfather, Ed Hill, was born in the mid-1800s in North Carolina as the product his master raping his mother, a slave. This evil man, whoever he was, not only dictated their every move and action, but also controlled every inch of their bodies. Eventually, after years of torture and enslavement, Ed Hill would gain his freedom. As I try and imagine and create a snapshot of freedom for this man, it frustrates me that there is not written history - no pictures, no articles for him. In my head, I picture a man leaving his enslavement and oppression and valiantly setting out to take ownership over his own life; something that cruel individuals and a heartless system had denied him since his first breath into this world.

Ed Hill's many descendants would continue to confront their own forms of racism and oppression throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From sharecropping to work discrimination, to my own Dad and his siblings traveling twice as far each morning and afternoon because of segregated schools, institutional bigotry would plague my family, as it did with so many others throughout the country and world.

However, one thing would remain as a constant reminder of their little bit of freedom: their land. After leaving North Carolina with his wife, a Choctaw woman, Ed Hill would buy land in

Indian Territory in what would eventually become the state of Oklahoma. This piece of land remains in our family to this day, supporting and garnering the attention of six generations of the Hill and Traylor family. This piece of land has served, and continues to serve, as a snapshot of freedom for my family.

While the snapshot of my Dad's family began in North Carolina during the mid-1800s, the snapshot of my Mom's family would begin quite literally a world away. The year is 1926 in Berlin, Germany. This would be the place that my Opa, Peter Baumgarten, my Mom's father, would call home for the first part of his life. As the oppressive and anti-Semitic German government grew stronger, the family left in 1933 to ensure their safety – my Opa with his brother and mother to Vienna, and his father to Sweden. From moving schools multiple times because of segregation laws to carrying an identification card marked "Israel", my Opa and his family felt the sting and strangle of systemic anti-Semitism. Eventually, as Hitler's murderous reign expanded to Austria, my Opa made his way to England on the *Kindertransport*, a system of rescue efforts that would relocate thousands and thousands of Jewish children from Nazi territory to Great Britain. My Opa separated from his entire family, reuniting with them briefly in England, before permanently joining together in the United States more than a year after leaving Vienna.

While my Opa passed away before I could have these difficult conversations with him, I found an incredible interview from the Springfield Union newspaper with his father that sums up their reunion: *"Frederich Baumgarten was happy. The wife and two boys who were his whole world were with him in peaceful America. The family was together again after being separated for 16 long months."* Following years of persecution, oppression, and the fear of losing their lives because of who they were and what they believed, my Opa and his family would come together and experience freedom in a new land.

I have two more snapshots of freedom to share with you tonight. While not directly connected to my family heritage, they are deeply connected to my story and serve as an inspiration and shining light to the entire world. One of these many snapshots occurred long ago, yet will sound familiar to many of us. It features thousands and thousands of Israelites marching hand in hand out of the land of Egypt. Away from the land of slavery and oppression and toward a land of freedom, righteousness, and opportunity. We just read part of this powerful story tonight from our Torah, and this week's *parasha* is truly a snapshot of freedom – after plagues descend upon Egypt, we see our valiant leaders following the word of God to once again stand up to their mighty oppressor; in anguish we witness Pharaoh finally relenting, and our people hurrying to escape tyranny and fulfill our destiny.

The other snapshot is of a forceful preacher standing in the shadow of a great president. It is August 28, 1963 and more than 250,000 people have come to our nation's capital to be a part of something special, something bigger than themselves – the March on Washington. Waiting intensely in the hot summer sun, they hear the words from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that continue to echo throughout this country. As he explains from where freedom will ring out, he displays a vision for a country and world where all people will "be able to join hands and

sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we are free at last'."

While many snapshots of freedom exist throughout the history of the world, to me freedom looks like a man escaping slavery and claiming his own independence. It looks like a young boy foiling Hitler's plans for the destruction of the Jewish people through his survival. It looks like Israelites marching hand in hand out of Egypt. It looks like a compassionate and inspired preacher challenging a country to fulfill its founding creed. All of these snapshots of freedom constantly inspire me; however, I am currently struggling to understand one other snapshot.

This final picture is of me, a 21-year old biracial, Jewish college student with so many opportunities for the future. I'm currently living in the most progressive and accepting generation in humanity...and yet I still do not feel completely free.

When a swastika appears on a bathroom stall or fence, I do not feel free.

When people shrug off the murders of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Jamar Clark and so many others, I do not feel free.

When people question a Jew of Color about their place in the Jewish community or their commitment to Judaism, I do not feel free.

When people refuse to even acknowledge the importance of or have conversations on the concepts of "privilege", "whiteness", or "racism", I do not feel free.

We are in the 21st century, far beyond the horrors of my ancestors; yet, in so many ways, the hidden and morphed forms of oppression, discrimination, and hatred continue to enslave me.

When future generations look back upon this period in history, what will they see? In order to create the snapshot that we can be proud of, a snapshot of love, justice, and compassion, we must learn from our past mistakes and transgressions. We must seek out the challenges that exist in the world and confront them head on. We must acknowledge the privileges that blind us to the oppression of others. And we must extend our hand to the weak and shower them with the love each human being deserves.

Now, these forward steps are bold and audacious for all of us here. For many individuals and communities, they may seem too tall of a task. Even though it may be uncomfortable or scary, each and every one of us has not just an opportunity, but an obligation, to educate ourselves about race and privilege, to call out people who use racial slurs, and to serve as allies and support to those in suffering. There is just too much at stake, too many lives, too many communities, too much promise, and too much hope for us, the Jewish people, to stand idly by.

What will our snapshot of freedom look like? If we follow our religious tradition, one that outright calls us to welcome the stranger, pursue justice, and take radical and positive action, we will find a snapshot of our community and world filled with love, compassion, and peace. On this Shabbat, as we honor the memory of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and connect ourselves to his mission and vision for a better world, let us have the humility to engage in difficult conversations, the compassion to hear the stories of one another, and the strength to continue marching together. I look forward to partnering with and gaining

inspiration from each and every one of you to make our world a more whole place for everyone. Shabbat Shalom.