

The Heart of George Floyd (z"l) Memorial Square

Rabbi Michael Adam Latz, Shir Tikvah (www.shirtikvah.net)

For Ikar, Shabbat Achrei Mot-K'doshim 5781, 24 April 2021

Tuesday night, I got home from what I believe was my 100th visit in the past year to George Floyd (z"l) Memorial Square at 38th & Chicago here in Minneapolis. I live 13 blocks from where Mr. Floyd, our neighbor, was murdered. This is my neighborhood. These are my neighbors.

I call George Floyd (z"l) my neighbor because he was. I didn't know him personally. But we inhabited the same city, shopped at the same stores, drove on the same roads. He was my neighbor.

In our parsha this week, we read those exquisite three words: v'ahavta l'reyecha kamocho, to love our neighbors as ourselves. This parsha is literally the portion of Torah at the very center, the very heart, of the Torah. And this mitzvah, this commandment, is at the heart of Torah.

There are many reasons why these words—to love our neighbors as ourselves—is at the center of our most sacred text.

First, we place things in the middle to protect them. Think about how herds of animals protect their young by surrounding them. We know how precious these words are, how central this commandment to love is, so we enclose it with the other words in order to protect it because it is so precious.

The other reason, of course, is that this is the heart of the religious enterprise. Be loving to your neighbors says the Divine; all the rest is commentary. Go and study. Go and make real.

How might our world have looked different if we had placed Mr. Floyd at the center of our community? If we had loved and protected life as precious? How would Daunte Wright's (z"l) story be different? Breonna Taylor (z"l)? Ahmed Aubrey (z"l)? Makiah Bryant (z"l)?

Tuesday night, following the guilty verdict of the police officer who murdered Mr. Floyd, thousands of people attended an interfaith vigil in George Floyd Memorial Square. In the place where last May we witnessed the worst of humanity choke the life out of Mr. Floyd, Tuesday night we saw a glimpse of the best: A brilliant multi-racial, multi-faith, multi-generational sea of humanity weeping, praising, praying,

challenging, supporting, loving each other, fiercely. Black, Brown, Native, Immigrant, Asian, Latine, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Christian, Unitarian, Bahai, Buddhist, young, old, middle aged, Queer, those with disabilities— all present. We heard cries and song and Psalms and wailing; we recited Mourner’s Kaddish; we stood in silent vigil for nine minutes and 29 seconds.

It is not enough. It will never be enough. Mr. Floyd should be reading stories to his daughter Gianna tonight, not being mourned.

Tuesday night, we came together with busted relief and raspy joy, overwhelming grief and perhaps a glimpse of hope because 12 people believed what they saw: **That George Floyd’s heart was not too big; Derek Chauvin’s was too small.**

I share this with you because I need you, members of the IKAR community, to know firsthand what it is like here. I want you to be part of the neighborhood we’re building; I need us to see each other as neighbors.

Amidst the headlines, sound bites, and punditry, an extraordinary movement is being birthed. In Minneapolis and in Brooklyn Center, where Daunte Wright (z”l) was murdered by police last week, people have come together in exquisite mutual aid and communal support: free clothing for those who need; the creation of public art; a memorial space and artistic installation for all those killed by Minneapolis police in the past 50 years; space for prayer and contemplation; meditation tents; doctors and nurses offering medical care; job coaches working with people to find employment; two middle school students Wednesday night with their laptops helping folks sign up for their COVID vaccines; prophetic activists of every age with bullhorns demanding the state re-envision public safety, address systemic racism and police violence, and make reparations; free food and water and diapers. It’s a holy, glorious, vibrant, radical, beautiful place of moral imagination and soul and tears and overwhelming grief and suffering and hope.

I understand that firebombed buildings make for headlines and clickbait and are more sensational than a community coming together to care for each other. And yes, there was tremendous damage done to buildings here in the Twin Cities during the uprising last summer. Some of it was perpetrated by protestors; some perpetrated by white nationalists.

That is part of this heartbreaking story.

I also want you to know this extraordinary story of human dignity and compassion and love.

To bear witness to “*v’ahavta l’reycha kamocho*” in such vivid and vibrant color day after day after day, in the 100 degree humidity in June and in the -30 degree cold in the

winter; to stand in the place of murderous violence where people respond repeatedly with generosity and compassion and love... I wish I could find the words to describe the beauty, the pain, the hope, and the love. Next to the birth of my children, I'm not certain I've ever witnessed something so beautiful, so awesome, so life altering.

Mr. Floyd should be alive today. I didn't know him in life. In his memory, I am profoundly grateful to be part of a community striving to grieve a world that is dying and dream a new world into being.

I pray the murderer's conviction signals the beginning of a new era where we transform the platitude of every person being created *b'tzelem Elohim* into robust practice, into the cornerstone of our social policy, moral priority, and political commitment.