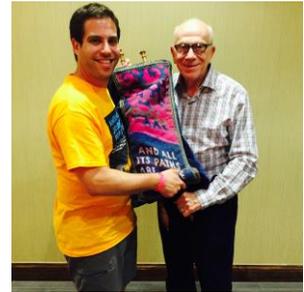


**THE JOURNEY FOR JUSTICE:
FROM CHERAW, SOUTH CAROLINA TO ROCKINGHAM, NORTH CAROLINA WITH MY GRANDCHILDREN**



The Journey for Justice (August 1-September 16) is a march commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1965 March on Selma. The itinerary, however, is in reverse, from Selma to Washington DC. The NAACP conceived the idea of this effort and is supported by many social conscience organizations. The RAC (Reform Action Center) is the only religious community in the United States that partnered to join the march from start to finish. Since it began over 250 Reform Rabbis have walked a portion of the road linking Selma to Washington DC. A Torah scroll accompanies the marchers and each night it is passed off, in relay race style, to the next group of participating rabbis.

I joined the Journey for Justice on Friday, August 28 in Columbia, South Carolina receiving the scroll from my colleague and friend, Rabbi Neil Hirsch of Congregation Chevra of the Berkshires in Great Barrington, MA.

I decided to take part in the Journey for Justice, remembering my days at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio in the late 1950's. Then I was part of a cadre of rabbinic students who helped integrate the lunch counter in a sit-in at F. W. Woolworth in downtown Cincinnati and Coney Island a large recreation facility with a swimming pool, which was a white redoubt overlooking the Ohio River. But, I asked myself, what do my grandchildren know of this history except from textbooks and visual aids in classrooms and school assemblies. Would they feel on a deeply human level the pain and deprivation of fellow American citizens? I decided to join the march as a personal link to my past but also to bring my eldest grandchildren, Sarah (18) who sets off for the University of Michigan as a freshman in a few days and my grandson, Ari who will enter the eighth grade next week. I wanted to share this experience, not with words, but with our feet pressed to the asphalt road, surrounded by people who were passionate about the need to push forward and advance the ideals of this great democracy.

We met people from many walks of life, from a variety of geographic points in the U.S.A. as we began the twenty-five mile course from Cheraw, S.C. to Rockingham, N.C. We were well prepared: good walking shoes, homemade food, plenty of water and Gatorade, and one State Police vehicle in the vanguard leading us and another protecting our rear. The essence of our experience lay in the people we encountered: Pastor Kevin who kept us apace; Jemiya who kept us in line formation; Delphinia who served us hot biscuits and scrambled eggs; Reverend Degruie, minister of the Cheraw A.M.E. Church who lifted the Torah scroll to his shoulders when our colleague, Rabbi Rachel Greengrass of Miami, FL grew weary. Watching him carry the Torah scroll nestled over his heart was a reminder of what great gifts come from true diversity - a diversity based on mutual acceptance and respect for the other. (So many of the participants felt honored that the Torah scroll was a continuous presence in the march.)

Perhaps the most interesting participant was the lead walker, 68 year-old, Middle Passage. He has

walked continuously since Selma on August 1st and plans to complete the journey in Washington DC on September 16th. He has walked over 560 of the 595 miles of the Journey for Justice completed to date. He changed his given name to Middle Passage in 1999, which was the sea course the African Slave Ships plied laden with their human cargo on their voyage to the new world. Middle Passage, a survivor of five open-heart surgeries set the pace and took a shinning to my grandchildren, Sarah and Ari. (See photo) He placed Ari at his side and together they walked, setting the pace of our group. We marched, responded to chants antiphonally, and sang songs on our way. Occasionally, others joined our group at designated gathering points along the roadside. March we did, straight to the South Carolina border where our South Carolina State Police detail bid us farewell and the North Carolina State Police detail met us for our onward journey to Rockingham, North Carolina.

At the welcome to North Carolina gathering we heard a sobering talk by a minister who gave a powerfully pointed historic retrospective on the raison for the Journey of Justice. He indicated that the present day effort to reverse or halt Voter Rights is not a throwback to the 1950's and 1960's; rather it is the patrimony of the 1879 North Carolina Constitutional Convention. At that assembly a bold black citizen demand three rights for all black people: 1) the right to serve as a witness in a court of law; 2) the right to serve as the member of a jury and 3) the right to vote. Here and now, in 2015, the right to vote is still not a guaranteed right of Black Americans.

The walk was long and at times physically taxing but the spirit of the marchers buoyed us onward. The weather was warm but there was a heavy cloud cover that protected us from the punishing rays of the sun. We reached Rockingham, celebrated the crossing into another state on the NAACP itinerary, and parted from many new friends who would continue on the journey.

We drove back to Cheraw where a homemade supper was spread and served by local volunteers. At the dinner Rabbi Steven Fink of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation met us and we passed off the Torah scroll to him. This scroll will be read on Rosh Hashannah morning in a Reform Temple in the Washington DC area and will serve as witness to our collective presence when the Journey for Justice concludes in our nation's capital two days later, September 16th.

Then together with my grandchildren, Sarah and Ari, Rabbi Greengrass, and Marcy and Rabbi David Thomas of Sudbury, MA we drove eighty-four miles back to Columbia, South Carolina to begin our homeward journeys.

In our tradition the month of Elul (August-September) is supposed to be the time when we as Jews prepare for the coming High Holy Days. The road from Cheraw, South Carolina to Rockingham, North Carolina was an unusual place to contemplate our failures and our successes in the past year. It brought home vividly yet another dimension of our needs; the need to also confront and reassess our successes and failures as Americans, and as American Jews.

Rabbi Bernard H. Mehlman
August 31, 2015 – 16 Elul 5775