

6/24/2014

Dear friends,

During the miracle of a longer than expected layover in Atlanta, I had the good fortune of visiting the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. The museum, which primarily focuses on the Black Freedom struggle through lens of its hometown activists, only opened yesterday.

Racist white politicians bellowed opposition to integration as I entered the first gallery. Although their remarks sprung from black and white television sets, fellow museum visitors reminded me this history was not archaic.

“There is my dad,” one woman proudly remarked, as she pointed to a picture on the wall of Atlanta’s first Black police officers. She went on to tell me about all the friends surrounding him in the picture

Later on, in the room dedicated to the martyrs of the Movement, another woman pointed to a portrait. “There he is,” she said. The man was her dad’s friend James Reeb.

Both were Unitarian Universalist ministers from Boston who regularly answered calls put out by Southern leadership for clergy to join demonstrations. After the first march from Selma to Montgomery was brutally suppressed by violent police forces, Reeb came down to Selma for the second attempt. He was murdered only a few days later.

I returned to the airport and boarded my flight to Jackson. Waiting for me was Eliza Meredith, a kind intern with the Institute for Southern Jewish Life, which has organized Jewish themed programming during the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Mississippi Freedom Summer. She also picked up Heather Booth, who will speak as part of a panel on Friday before services, and Heather’s friend, fellow Freedom Summer veteran, Marshall Ganz.

As we traveled to the places we would rest, the legends in the car with us, one who founded the venerable Midwest Academy activist training institute, and the other who went on to organize with the United Farm Workers and later serve as the genius behind the campaign that elected the first Black president, were simply friends reminiscing about a tragic and beautiful summer that changed their lives.

For Heather, it was odd riding so comfortably in a seat. As a white woman in a movement led by people of color, she was used to driving in integrated cars. This posed a serious threat to all those riding with her. As a safety measure, she lay down flat against the floorboard with the carpet placed over her body. As we passed near the fairgrounds, Marshall recalled when it was turned into a segregated prison. The sadistic guards always thought of more cruel ways to treat him and his friends.

A sign for Meridian, Mississippi, came up along the road. Both remarked how the mere sight of the name was difficult to stomach. Their comrades James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner were assigned to organize there. All three were brutally murdered early on in the summer of 1964.

The death of the three civil rights workers struck a chord with the nation. Activist Rita Schwerner, who was also Mickey's wife, boldly challenged the president and courageously told the press that the reason anyone even took notice of the three was because two were white.

Heather shared a story about the family that hosted her for the Summer Project. Mary Lou and Andrew Hawkins were wise and dedicated activists. The family went on to win a landmark case that challenged the underdevelopment of public services in Black neighborhoods. Soon after the case was affirmed by the circuit court, Mary Lou was shot and killed by a police officer. The Hawkins home was set on fire twice. A son and two granddaughters died in the second blaze.

In disgust, Heather remarked how "cheap Black life was back then." We must change this from remaining so.

Onward in struggle,

Jay Saper

6/25/2014

Dear friends,

This morning Rachel Myers picked me up to bring me to the conference at the historic Tougaloo College. One of the few places where an integrated crowd could meet during the Movement, several key decisions were made on the very grounds we walked.

Rachel, the museum project coordinator with the Institute for Southern Jewish Life, told me about how she helped to bring *From Swastika to Jim Crow* to Tougaloo. The exhibit tells the story of Jewish intellectuals who fled Nazi Germany and were welcomed by historically Black colleges.

Professor Ernst Borinski was one of the refugees. At Tougaloo, he supported the capacity of students to think critically and take action against injustice. He initiated a Social Science Forum where integrated audiences would engage in dialogue on critical issues.

The most memorable part of the morning was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Freedom Singers. Before they began, they told how their music is not about the Movement, but rather of the Movement. It is what gave their friends so much strength to advance with courage in face of the terror they confronted.

When the search for the bodies of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner took to the water, body after mangled body turned up. Months passed before the three were finally found. The Freedom Singers sang a song they wrote about the Mississippi River. It is phenomenal how the saddest song can still give one the resolve to carry on.

In the Mississippi River  
Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord  
In the Mississippi River  
Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord  
In the Mississippi River

Well, you can count them one by one  
It could be your son  
Well, you can count them two by two  
It could be me or you  
Well, you can count them three by three  
Do you wanna see?  
Well, you can count them four by four

In the afternoon I met with Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson, an organization that is working to create Black-led worker cooperatives in Jackson. I am helping to organize a campaign, [Jews for Jackson](#), to encourage the Jewish community to act in our legacy of standing in solidarity with Blacks in the South by contributing to the exciting work of Cooperation Jackson and the Southern Grassroots Economies Project. It is an honor to play a small part in trying bolster the relationship between Blacks and Jews as we direct our energies to build a better world.

Plant some okra,

Jay Saper

6/26/2014

Dear friends,

The history here lives on in human form, humbly wandering the halls of Tougaloo.

Chuck McDew casually began talking with Etta King from the Jewish Women's Archive. Before long, we learned from the first chair of SNCC that both he and she had attended Brandeis. He remembers Angie Davis, as he called her, being the only other Black student on campus at the time. The lead organizer of the Freedom Summer project, Bob Moses, once described Chuck as "Black by birth, a Jew by choice, and a revolutionary by necessity."

Freedom Summer veterans made their way to the front of large gym, lining up beyond two microphones for their role call. We in the audience sat on the edge of our seats. We listened for hours to these courageous people tell their stories. A few lessons became clear.

Local Mississippians made up the backbone of the Movement and were far more courageous than any volunteer who came to the state. Also, Freedom Summer was not an event that changed the world; rather, it was a catalyst that changed the lives of thousands of peoples who would forever refuse to tolerate injustice. So many of the veterans have found creative ways to carry out their thirst for freedom by living on as activists in new ways for the age old cause of liberation.

After, I had the opportunity to briefly thank Rita for her courage. Then, I talked with Ed Whitfield of Fund for Democratic Communities and Ben Burkett of the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives.

Ed has been politically formed through his student leadership during protests at Cornell in 1969 and ongoing labor organizing. Ben has worked with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives to challenge discrimination by the United States Department of Agriculture and expand landholdings of Black family farmers.

In the evening, we made our way to the Mississippi Museum of Art. We went to view the exhibit, *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement*. Debra Schultz, author of the phenomenal book *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* gave us an introduction to the photographs and provided some guiding questions to think about as we made our way through the exhibit.

I must confess to not following the directions so well. The photographs were indeed captivating. However, after a viewing a few, I felt compelled to learn more about a phenomenal veteran who had briefly introduced herself earlier. I sat down next to Millicent Brown. Before I knew it, the rest of the group had finished the exhibit and was waiting on me for dinner.

I was completely enthralled, taking in every word she spoke. Certainly many know about the Little Rock Nine and Ruby Bridges, but truth be told, there were countless students across the country who played similar roles. My aunt was among the first class to integrate schools right here in Jackson, Mississippi. I admire her family's decision to keep her in public schools, instead of withdrawing as most white families did.

Yet, those who were the most courageous were the young students of color who were the first to enter previously all white schools. Before me was one of them, Millicent Brown. Millicent desegregated schools in the state of South Carolina. The original case had been in her sister's name, but the racist court delayed until her sister graduated. Her father, president of the local NAACP, and lawyer, the inimitable Constance Baker Motley of the Legal Defense Fund, were able to transfer the case into Millicent's name to keep the suit alive.

While they won, the struggle for racial justice still lives on. Millicent was a brilliant student whose knowledge often startled teachers who had not before encountered students of color. One lesson she remembers having learned most clearly from that first year was how to control her bladder. Fellow students would form a blockade and prevent her from entering the bathroom.

They would let her in seconds before the bell would ring, so if she chose to still go, she would be reprimanded for arriving to class late.

Most students were not hostile, but they were not friendly either. She has since befriended several of the white students who now tell of much rosier pasts than were actually lived. Millicent must remind these friends that back then they made no effort to invite her to play. Only one student approached her to be her friend on that first day. Their picture together made the cover of the *New York Times* the next morning. The family of that girl was out of town at the time and learned of their daughter's new friend at the newsstand.

It is so tempting to look back and convince myself that I would be that friend. Though, I think it is perhaps healthy to admit the greater possibility I would not. Allowing ourselves to open honestly to the injustices of the world we have entered and how that shapes our actions can help us better reflect. It can provide clarity that moves us to step out of comfortable positions to do what is right.

Still moving on,

Jay Saper

6/27/2014

Dear friends,

I am writing to you while I live. I am writing because others have given their lives to justice and we must keep their stories alive. The morning session was a memorial to the martyrs of the Movement, with full recognition that any effort to acknowledge all would be incomplete.

So little is known about the many who gave their lives in the name of freedom. Those organizing the conference have dug up many hidden histories and invited fellow veterans to share their knowledge as well. What they compiled was beautiful and enraging.

Before we headed to lunch, I had an opportunity to chat briefly with Pam McMichael, director of the legendary popular education center and Southern movement hub Highlander. She is a leader of Showing Up for Racial Justice, a group of white anti-racists who were inspired by our Jews for Jackson campaign and are working to fundraise a broader community to support Southern Black leadership in the next economy.

Lunch was held at the Institute for Southern Jewish Life. Mark Levy and Larry Rubin provided stimulating discussion on how their understanding of Judaism as inseparable from progressive social action had convinced them to join the Black Freedom Movement.

After heading South, they learned about the complexity of the American Jewish experience. Both were turned away from synagogues that were fearful their very presence at services would endanger the congregation. Larry thought he was living the final moments of his life when police

got out their clubs and remarked on how long it had been since they had killed themselves a Heeb. Thankfully he was spared. Both have continued to live admirably as activists and Jews, working in solidarity with Black communities.

When we got back to Tougaloo, I went to a film and discussion on Wednesdays in Mississippi with Etta and Elana Kogan of Bend the Arc. Wednesdays in Mississippi was a multiracial group of women started by Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women. They travelled down to Mississippi to develop relationships with local women, bring needed supplies to Freedom Schools, and spread the message of what they learned back home. It was an honor to be in that space with women who were a part of Wednesdays in Mississippi and two women who are courageously working for a better world today.

After, we headed to the Beth Israel Congregation. The Schul was bombed the year it opened in its present location. A statue of Moses was under a skylight at the time. Rubble fell around it, but did not touch the sculpture. A halo of debris kept Moses safe. I got to see him. A couple months after the incident, Rabbi Nussbaum, who visited Civil Rights activists in jail, had his house bombed as well.

There was another panel that was similar to the one at lunch, but it also included Heather Booth. Jennifer Stollman moderated and Debra Schultz provided historical context. It was amazing in the short time between the panel and the service to interact with so many of the phenomenal women I had read about in Debra's book.

The service was the first led by the Institute's new Rabbi. It had a Freedom Summer theme. I was fortunate to be asked to read a passage from a Freedom Summer veteran during the service. It was surreal approaching the bimah. To the left were metal letters on the wall: Know Before Whom You Stand.

Perhaps it was intended to reference some God greater than any person in that room, yet to me, it spoke to all who were in it. Before the Ark were humans. Humans no more or less than you or me. Humans who have proved that common people committed to good lives in search of justice can change the course of history.

I took a deep breath, reflecting on those before whom I stood. There were the esteemed panelists and brilliant women covered in Debra's book. There were countless more Freedom Summer veterans who casually blended in. There was Hank Thomas, one of the original Freedom Riders who was on the bus when it was bombed in Anniston, Alabama, and who has continued to speak to the powerful ways Jews have stood with Blacks for racial justice throughout his life.

I read Vicki Gabriner's words:

One of the strong things I grew up with as a kid was some sense of fighting for social justice, and without realizing it, that that was rooted somehow in Jewish tradition. It was never specifically identified to me as such, and I don't

even know that that was what was driving people. But as I look back on it now, I know that that was part of that Jewish secular tradition of social justice.

After, several of us went to dinner. I had the good fortune of sitting next to Ira Grupper and Raylawni Branch, both veterans. Ira had chaired the New Jewish Agenda, an early Jewish organization to publically advocate for the rights of Palestinians. Raylawni is one of the Mississippians without whom there would have been no Movement.

Ira was brought to Louisville by his friend Anne Braden and has continued on as a labor and disability rights activist. Raylawni is involved in the creation of a Civil Rights museum in her hometown of Hattiesburg. She will soon donate a receipt from her poll tax and the constitution from which she studied for the exam to register to vote. I hope I will be able to make it to Hattiesburg when it opens.

As I go to bed, I reflect on those before whom I stood. It truly was an audience of agents for change. While marveling at this fact has a space for importance, I see the challenge as approaching all spaces where humans gather and seeing the holy potential in us all to take collective action to build a better world.

Love,

Jay Saper

6/28/2014

Dear friends,

Between sessions, I ran into Dave Dennis, one of the lead organizers for the Freedom Summer project, and thanked him for his inspiring life. I also encountered the first white staff member of SNCC, and son of a Klansman, Bob Zellner.

To me, Bob is proof that none of us has an excuse. Troubled times and conditions not of our choosing undoubtedly shape us, yet we still are responsible for how we choose to respond. There is no excuse for choosing the path of colluding with oppression. In us is the potential to harm and also to change course.

In the afternoon, Marjorie Dove Kent of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice moderated a panel on Jewish activists of past and present, including Etta, Ira, Elana, and Larry. Ira stole the show when burst into a song about his son, which would also be fitting for my brother and me. It went something like:

David's mom's a Catholic  
David's dad's a Jew  
And everybody's asking  
What will David do  
Do do do do do do do do  
David doesn't give a shit

Next, was a space to share more with each other about the various initiatives we are working on. In the break between I was fortunate to talk with my aunt's good friend Dana Larkin. Dana has been public schools advocate her whole life. The Orkin's, the generous family that hosted me over the week, had told me she was the congregant of Beth Israel who most epitomized *tikkun olam*. Although she was out of town the night before, her name still came up at services. She is organizing the visit to Jackson of youth involved with Operation Understanding, a program that builds solidarity between young Blacks and Jews.

At dinner I learned more from about the exciting work Avodah is doing in New Orleans and the tremendous force Carolina Jews for Justice has been at Moral Mondays in North Carolina. I could see what Heather had meant when she spoke the day before about the exciting re-flowering of Jewish organizations committed to social change over the past couple decades. It is an honor to be among those who are a part of this energy we must never let die.

Singing,

Jay Saper

6/29/2014

Dear friends,

Most folks took off last night or early this morning. As Elana and I did not leave until the afternoon, Malkie Schwartz, the incredible person who organized all of the Jewish programming along with Rachel, took us to lunch.

I got a good filling of fried okra as I learned more about Malkie's life. She grew up Orthodox in Brooklyn. She founded Footsteps, an organization that helps people who are Orthodox explore the world beyond their communities. She, and her partner who is an educator, are very concerned about the lack of secular education young Orthodox children receive. She suggested I connect with her organization when I move to New York City and possibly tutor some youth.

After finishing the delicious grits and biscuits, we went on to the Mississippi Museum of Art. Malkie and Elana could not make it on Thursday. I was there, but so engrossed in conversation with Millicent that I was happy to return.

It was powerful getting to take our time and look at everything thoroughly. I enjoyed the elements of human resiliency that shone through many of the pictures, as well as the way in which masses of everyday people were held up as the real leaders of the struggle.

One particular photograph stood out. In it was a young Black boy holding a flag and a white cop trying to rip it right out of his hand. Next to the boy was June Finer, a doctor who was planning

on getting arrested so she could care for comrades behind bars. This phenomenal woman humbly sat to my left in the audience during yesterday's panel.

After the photographs was an exhibit on Norman Rockwell's Murder in Mississippi, a painting he did on the first anniversary of the murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner for a magazine article on racial injustice. At the end of the exhibit was a mirror with James Chaney's epitaph above it:

There are those who are alive  
Yet will never live  
There are those who are dead  
Yet will live forever  
Great deeds inspire and  
Encourage the living

If I am to live a life of half the meaning of those who stood firmly for justice in Mississippi half a century ago, I know my existence will have been for something worthwhile.

Thanks to all who made this special week possible. Tomorrow I begin my studies at Bank Street College to become an early childhood and elementary educator. I look forward to carrying all the lessons I learned with me as I support the genius creativity, questioning spirit, and caring concern of those very young.

Live, act, and inspire,

Jay Saper