



opinions

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JEWISH LIGHT EDITORIAL

Why Ferguson Matters

We can't let the alleged criminal acts of a select few take away from what we've learned in the year after Michael Brown's death. We just can't.

On Sunday, the nation watched as largely peaceful protests marking the anniversary of the initial events in Ferguson involving Brown and police officer Darren Wilson. The incident sparked newfound self-reflection about race relations and opportunity (or lack thereof) in America.

But then as night descended on Ferguson, two incidents — an alleged firing upon police SUVs and responsive fire, and a separate drive-by shooting — marred demonstrators' efforts to keep us focused on the social ills surrounding the events of Aug. 9, 2014 and other racially-tinged police conduct in Baltimore, Cleveland and elsewhere.

As the world looks upon St. Louis a year later, with headlines in major media reflecting on the acts that shepherded an international conversation, random acts of violence by community members cannot dampen our aspirations, nor should they impede our progress.

The cynical among us will look at the happenings of the past year and say that nothing's changed. We still have discriminatory policing, a lack of community dialogue, stark contrasts in how those of different races are treated and inequity in the prospects for opportunity, success and satisfaction.

That may all be true as far as it goes, but it's not the complete story by any stretch. In this year of powerful discussion, we've talked about so many things:

Police: Despite no prosecution issuing in the Brown case by either local or federal authorities, a United States Department of Justice report blasted Ferguson's police department and practices. Addressing discriminatory attitudes of police has become an essential element of hiring, training and evaluation. Encouraging use of body cameras to escape subjective narratives about awful events became a common lobbying theme. Focusing on police-community dialogue on a regular basis, not just when crisis occurs, has been a continuing emphasis of policy discussions.

Municipalities: The nation has looked critically at the use of substantial municipal fines for petty crimes, a practice that serves as a regressive tax system to fund local jurisdictions' operations. This has been especially examined locally, as St. Louis County has any number of small jurisdictions that exist for no reason other than historical accident, and should be combined into larger, more professionally-run entities. Balancing city operations on the backs of those who can least

afford it, whose unpaid fines turn into interest- and penalty-compounded loads, is no way to run a railroad.

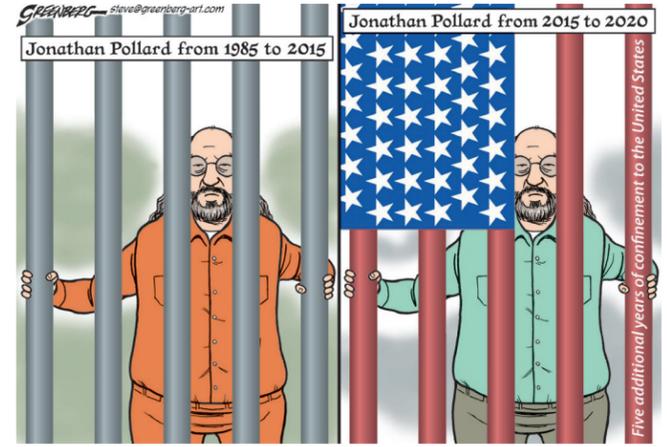
Race in America: We've had some extremely painful but essential discussions. Some have remained at the slogan-laced level of "Black Lives Matter" versus "All Lives Matter." These emanate from mostly well-intentioned folks — not all who utter the former are militant haters, any more than those who put forward the latter are all racists — but this form of simplistic debate tends to push Americans more away from each other than toward.

Far more substantive dialogue has issued, however, about the prospects of working through and, if possible, past, our racial challenges. One major contribution was the African-American journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates' book-length letter to his son, "Between the World And Me." Coates' beautifully written and insightful tome about the plight of blacks in this country, highly subjective and opinionated, offers much room for debate about many topics — slavery, racism, policing, privilege, prospects for the future and more. It has served as a springboard for viewpoints across the spectrum of ideas, including a controversial column by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who admired Coates' rhetoric and brilliance but questioned his fairly static view of progress and rejection of American exceptionalism.

The virtual debate among Coates, Brooks and others is critically important. It is essential that we each continue to speak about the matter, and speak with integrity and conviction. Those values should be part of our moral fabric as we address the issues before us. It is not necessary that each and every one of us share some imaginary politically correct solution, only that we hold ourselves to the highest of standards in our quest for equality, fairness and opportunity.

As we assess the year after Ferguson, and the state of race relations in America, we are conflicted. On the one hand, it is unrealistic by any stretch to expect that longstanding, institutionally-supported patterns will disappear overnight. On the other, without a constant and firm reminder of our past and present shortcomings, we will hardly be able to escape the shackles of our historical blunders.

As painful as it is, as anguished as it may make us, we must continue talking, debating and challenging ourselves. If we do keep the issues front and center, anything is possible. But if we don't, the lessons of the year will recede into the background, and we'll have nothing left but whispers of something we briefly thought was important.



Steve Greenberg Cartoon

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

JCRC on one-year anniversary of Ferguson

Last week marked the one-year anniversary of the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson. There have been many conversations around issues of racial inequality, bias in the criminal justice system and the need for municipal government reform. The Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) is committed to continuing its focus on its programs that are addressing the issues of racial inequality and criminal justice reform. These include:

- The work of the Community Against Poverty (CAP) Coalition and the Newmark Institute for Human Relations in the area of improving access to quality, affordable early childhood education in under resourced communities;
- The work of CAP in combatting poverty and marshaling community resources to alleviate hunger;
- JCRC's ongoing collaboration with the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, including co-sponsorship of the African-American-Jewish Task Force, which meets regularly to dialogue on common issues of concern, and JCRC's work in support of the Save Our Sons Program;
- The Newmark Institute's focus on mass incarceration.

The JCRC marks the one-year anniversary of Ferguson with hope that the racial divides brought into sharp relief by the events surrounding Brown's death will continue to be intensively addressed. JCRC is committed to equal rights, justice and opportunity for all and will continue to work for a St. Louis community dedicated to addressing what divides us and finding positive solutions moving forward.

Robert D. Millstone, President

Batya Abramson-Goldstein, Executive Director

Response to editorial

The *Jewish Light's* July 1 editorial ("Making Love Legal") was a virtual celebration of the Supreme Court's narrow decision finding state laws prohibiting marriage contracts between same sex couples in violation of the constitution. Regardless of how the *Light's* staff and even the majority of the St. Louis Jewish community greet this, there is no excuse for the paper's editorial writers to conflate treatment of Jews wherever Germany held power with that of gays during the era of National Socialism. To do so is not only historically incorrect, but also completely misinterprets the genocidal uniqueness of the German "war against the Jews" and the exceptionalism of the Shoah in the history of genocide.

Unlike genocides before and after the National Socialist Era, the Shoah's aim was the eradication of every Jew anywhere in the world. This is extraordinarily different than the treatment of any other groups (with the exception perhaps of the mentally ill and the Romany).

Every Jew was the genetic enemy of the Nordic/Aryan and had to be destroyed. No other groups, and certainly not gays, were marked in this way. To commit gay acts was a crime, yet many Nazis were gay, especially in the early leadership of the SA. Gays could avoid criminalization by not engaging in homosexual acts. If caught, imprisonment in concentration camps, not necessarily death camps, with identifying pink triangles on their uniform was a not unusual penalty. While this was certainly wrong and imprisonment not easy, the fact that it could be avoided by one's choice of actions and that it rarely resulted in death are startlingly different than the fate of the Jews whose fate was determined by their "Jewishness," not actions.

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