

Rabbi Judith Schindler  
“A Time to Sleep and A Time to Act”  
Temple Beth El/First Baptist Church West Sermon Xchange  
MLK 2011

It is great to be here. Thank you for inviting me. There is no place I could imagine being on Sunday of MLK Weekend than with all of you. You are a blessed community – with a great Pastor. Dr. Woods spoke to our congregation on Friday night. He awed us with his wisdom and moved us with his passion. He was the perfect preacher to set off our community’s Crossroads and Mecklenburg Ministries’ second annual sermon Exchange in which over 50 clergy will exchange pulpits across lines of difference. I am humbled to preach here in his pulpit and to stand in the shadow of his homiletical excellence.

I admire not only your Pastor but all of you. You practice what you preach. Here at First Baptist Church – West, you bring your faith to life through your role in the community. You believe in social justice and you work to create a world which is socially just. You have 32 ministries, a gang prevention program, an afterschool program, a summer institute.

There was a great Civil Rights activist, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who took leave of his teaching post at the Jewish Theological Seminary to march down South with the great Dr. Martin Luther King. When describing the experience, he famously said, “I felt as if I was praying with my feet.” Here at First Baptist Church West you pray with your beautiful voices. You pray with your compassionate hands and loving hearts. Yet most of all, like Heschel, you pray with your feet and with your actions.

When Dr. Woods graciously invited me to be here, he did not clarify at which service I’d be speaking. I scanned your website and noted that you had two services – a contemporary service at 8:00 am and a traditional service at 11:00 am. It wasn’t till early this week that your Pastor clarified that I’d preach only at the 11:00 service. I was thankful.

You see, I am a nighttime person. I love studying and writing well past midnight.

I am not a morning person. I have a hard time waking up. Usually, I have to hit the snooze button several times before my body can function. I need to drink strong coffee

and have a hot shower to bring back my soul. If I were preaching at 8:00 am, I'd be dangerously asleep at the pulpit.

I am a nighttime person. According to my faith, nighttime is a time of prophecy.

We have this 1/60 formula in the Talmud (which is a vast and profound text of Jewish wisdom). The Rabbis of old teach that the Sabbath is 1/60 of heaven. Sleep is 1/60 of death. Dreams are 1/60 of prophecy.

We need to sleep because we need to renew our bodies.

We need to sleep because we need to dream and we need to hear God's voice.

But then...we need to wake up.

In Judaism, we have a blessing for the moment we awake.

*"Modeh ani lifanechah,"* we are meant say in Hebrew as we open our eyes. "Thank you God for restoring my soul within me."

Additionally, we thank God for giving us the ability to distinguish day from night.

God has blessed all of us with the ability to distinguish day from night for we are here right now. God has blessed all of us with the ability to distinguish darkness from light. Yet far too often, we fail to take advantage of the gift of discernment we have been given.

The words "Beth El" in the Bible conjure up an image of dreams. Our patriarch Jacob lay down to sleep and dreamt of a ladder reaching up to heaven with angels ascending and descending the rungs. When he awoke he said, *"Achen yesh Adonai bmakom hazeh,"* behold God is in this place, and I did not know it." And he named the place Beth El which means the "house of God."

Beth El is about dreams.

Martin Luther King's birthday is about dreams.

This day is about Dr. King's dream "that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

This day is about Dr. King's dream that his four children and all children of our country will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Beth El is about dreams. MLK is about Dr. King's dreams and his movement towards their fulfillment.

But I have come this morning to tell you that sleeping and dreaming are not enough. We need to wake up and we need to act.

Ecclesiastes taught that there is a time for everything:

There is a time be born and a time to die

There is a time to weep and a time to laugh

There is a time to mourn and a time to dance,

There is a time to be silent and a time to speak,

And I would add there is a time to sleep — when we are weary from our day's work and need the renewal of body and soul that dreams and slumber offer.

And there is a time to wake up, when we are weary of our world's ways.

I remember being stunned when I learned that Rosa Parks, the "mother of the Civil Rights movement" was only 42 years old when she refused to obey the bus driver's demand to give up her seat on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama to a white person. I mistakenly thought that she was old, but at that time on that bus, she was two years younger than I am right now, and I am not old. Rosa Parks was physically no more tired than most of us are at the end of a long day of labor.

"The only tired I was," she remarked in an interview, "was tired of giving in. I was tired of being treated like a second-class citizen."

Rosa Parks was spiritually tired — of the inequity, discrimination, and hatred she knew. “When I made the decision,” she added, “I knew I had the strength of my ancestors with me.”

Today, we need to be tired as well: tired of educational and economic inequities. We need to be tired of federal, state and county budgets that place children and educational allocations at too low a rung on their list of priorities.

There is a time to sleep and there is a time to wake up. Now is that time to wake up.

Waking up is hard, I know. I am working mom who writes sermons and does laundry late into the night only to awaken at dawn to parent, with my husband, two energetic elementary school boys.

Waking up is physically hard. But much harder than that, is waking up to our news, waking up to our past, waking up to the painful racial realities we have created.

On our Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, which falls in September, we sound an ancient alarm – the shofar. I’ve invited my son Max who will be eleven next week, to sound the ram’s horn.

[Max will blast the shofar]

The great medieval scholar Maimonides taught that the shofar’s stark sound should speak to us saying: “Wake up you sleepers from your sleep! Rouse yourself, you slumberers, out of your slumber! Wake up from your sins! Examine your deeds, change your ways, turn back to God in repentance.”

The shofar blast is meant to awaken us not from physical sleep but from spiritual sleep, from allowing the inequities of our world to harden our hearts and deaden our souls.

Today, all of us need to wake up to the racial tensions that exist in our community. We need to admit our collective wrongs that led us to this place and to act on all sides to heal them.

First, we need to wake up to the wrongs of our past, the wrongs of yesterday and yesteryear.

I once went to visit Friendship Missionary Baptist Church. I wanted to see their awesome stained glass windows. On one wall an enormous artistic array of glass captures the story of creation to the resurrection of Jesus. Along the other wall tells the story of Africans being brought over from their homeland in the chains to slavery and their journey to emancipation.

Upon seeing the windows, I shared with the volunteer showing me around my revelation “Oh, this is YOUR history!”

“No,” he replied, “This is OUR history,” — meaning his and mine.

My first response was to reject this notion. In my mind, I countered his assertion, “This is not my history. I’m Jewish for one, so the Jesus narrative is not my own, and I descend from a father who was born in Nazi Germany. A large portion of my family tree was murdered by the Nazis. When blacks were enslaved here, I was dealing with my own family’s horrific oppression in Eastern Europe with pogroms in Russia on my mom’s side and anti-Semitism in Germany on my dad’s.”

Yet when he said again, “This is our history,” his teaching transformed my understanding of our community.

This volunteer was right. Slavery is our history. It is the history for those of us who lived in the South and were slaves. It is the history for those of us who lived in the South and were slave owners. It is the history of all of us whether we lived here or not – whether we were slaves or slave owners or so called “innocent bystanders” who did nothing, in my mind, standing as guilty as the rest.

Yet slavery is not the only nightmare which we yearn to block out of our memories. The wrongs of our past and present when it comes to Charlotte race relations are many.

In the 1930's through the 1960's we committed the sin of bank "redlining" in which whole Charlotte neighborhoods were denied loans based simply on the race and ethnicity of the residents. Huge disinvestment resulted and the creation of racially based economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

In the 1950's, our federal government created the interstate highway system and our local government allowed those highways to run through African American neighborhoods – never touching white neighborhoods such as Dilworth or Meyers Park.

In the 1960's, urban renewal similarly tore down established African American neighborhoods so that new buildings could be built and an influx of federal community development funds could come our way.

We need to accept responsibility for our inadequate response to the court decision of 2001 that brought an end to Charlotte's busing and a re-segregation of Charlotte's schools. We need to admit our failure to successfully overcome the far reaching educational challenges and inequitable classroom dynamics that resulted.

Today, we face the consequences of our actions. The racial mistrust of School Board decisions is not about now but about the decades and centuries of failing to see that “self-evident truth that all men, all women and all children are created equal.”

In ancient times when we acted wrongly, on our day of atonement, we placed our hands on a goat, symbolically transferring our community's sins to that innocent animal and sent it off to *azazel* – to nowhere land. Today we do the same... but not with a goat. Far worse, we scapegoat, placing the blame for our wrongs not on ourselves but on others.

We need to wake up and right our wrongs. We need to work together as partners, African Americans and whites and those of every shade of skin to create a Charlotte of equality. We need to work together, Christians and Jews, to create a city, county, state and country that lives the values of our faith. We need to stop dreaming of racial equality and trust, we need to make it so — through sermon exchanges, through honest dialogues, through developing friendships and partnerships to create that bright future we collectively desire.

We all are tired and it is tempting to sleep, but dreaming alone in the silence of our slumber will get us nowhere.

Together we need to have faith and take those first steps, as King said, not being able to see the whole staircase. We need to step into the waters of a truly integrated Charlotte, all the while not seeing the other side of the sea.

Integrated neighborhoods and workplaces and schools and a Charlotte society is our goal. Walking and working and awaking side by side to face our tough realities is the path we must take.

At night, we sleep and we dream. Yet as dawn breaks, we need to work together to create a better reality.

A rabbi in a modern midrash asked the following question:

“How do we know that the night has ended and day has begun?”

One of his students responded with confidence, “You know that the night has ended when you can distinguish a goat from a sheep.”

A second student suggested that night has ended when you can tell the difference between an olive and a fig tree.

“Those are all good answers,” said the rabbi. “But I believe that when you see white, black and olive skinned women walking towards you and you say these are my sisters. And when you see Islamic, Christian and Jewish men walking towards you and you say these are my brothers, then the night has truly ended and the day has begun.”

May the night of racial mistrust and divides in Charlotte end soon and may dawn break to bring about a more beautiful world. May we sleep and dream and may we wake up to work and make our joint vision for Charlotte a reality for all. Amen.