

Following His Arrest in St. Augustine by Hanan Sills

(Preface and conclusion written by Jordan Michels 2/4/22)

Clyde Sills was born in 1935. As a child during the Holocaust, he was acutely aware of oppression in the world and of his people. He heard the calling to be a teacher and went to Seminary. In his last months of school, he responded to a letter that MLK had written asking for help from Rabbi's to come as a presence to planned demonstrations for civil rights in St. Augustine. Wanting to help the oppressed and wanting to do his best to love his neighbor as himself Hanan went.

His experience in St. Augustine was transformative. In the month after meeting Dr. King, of seeing what was happening in the South, of being arrested, and of helping to write the letter answering why the Rabbis went there, Hanan came away from St. Augustine a changed man; well on the way to becoming what I call a universal Jew. No longer was he asking who is my neighbor, but rather who is not my neighbor.

In the month following these events President Johnston signed the Civil Rights act. And Rabbi Hanan wrote a sermon about his experience. In these few excerpts I offer a taste of the character and thoughts of Hanan at age 29.

(The following is excerpted from a sermon written in Milwaukee Wisconsin in 1964)

Israel has journeyed for 40 years in the desert – Now the slave generation born in Egypt has died out and a new generation born in the wilderness has risen and they are about to enter the promised land. Behold I have set the land before you. Go in and possess the land which the Lord swore unto your fathers... and the portion continues in verse 9... I am not able to bear you myself alone. How well the Torah portion addresses us. That challenge demands a response.

In our land today there are millions of human beings, children of slaves, who are seeking to possess what was promised them. If the American dream is to be more than vain rhetoric; if the ideals of religion in general and Judaism in particular are to be more than sound and fury which signify nothing, if the ideals are to become real, then we must fulfil the promise, and this burden cannot be born alone or it will not come to pass; for there is an inescapable network of mutuality for when any of us has *his* (their) humanity diminished, the humanity for all is diminished.

Most frightening is the notion that at the core of the matter is lies the idea of superior and inferior races... For the Jew that has been scarred and traumatized by the Nazi Holocaust, which was based on the doctrine of racism, such a view can only bring terror and disbelief. there is no half-way in this question, just as there is no half-way when you kill a man. When you diminish the humanity of a person through discrimination, you are killing him just as surely and perhaps more painfully and cruelly than if you plunged a knife into his heart.

But some Jews are disturbed by the involvement of Rabbis or others known to be Jews in this struggle. I hear: "Don't rock the boat! What good does it do?" What did they ever do for us. "Why don't they help themselves the way we did? We finally have made it in America, why jeopardize our position? Everything was so peaceful before this agitation; this only stirs up trouble and unrest!"

Well, being an authentic Jew never meant to rest — for thinking, feeling, sensitive human beings can never have complete rest — when the world about them is imperfect — that is for the lazy, the gross, for those who prefer to be cows or caterpillars. To be an authentic Jew, means to be disturbed and sometimes to disturb; to stimulate thinking, to inject empathy, and to make the presence of God felt in the hearts of people and nations.

To this day, every Jew knows that he may turn his back on his heritage, but if he wants to be true to it, he cannot close his heart to the cry of the persecuted; this is why Jews have been liberals and radicals — fighting for justice. This is why Jews were labor leaders in the days of the sweat shops and exploitation of child labor. That is why we struggle for the rights of the Negro — not because we expect a pat on the back or thanks — but because we are true to our tradition, our destiny, of being responsible for the moral Law among men.

After our arrest at St. Augustine, we prayed together for a new dawn of justice and mercy for all the children of God. We do not underestimate what needs to be done in North as well as the South. In the battle against racism, we have participated in just a skirmish. In the end we can't be certain what we have accomplished in St. Augustine beyond what we did for ourselves. But we believe that the total efforts of all such demonstrations have created a revolution and much more progress will be attained because the national conscious has been touched in this and other places in the struggle.

In our land today there are millions of human beings... .. seeking to possess what was promised them. This burden cannot be born alone... We the children of Israel, the spiritual descendants of the Patriarchs, Lawgivers and Prophets cannot turn our backs, we cannot remain silent in the face of iniquity. We must answer the question which is placed before us in the ways of our forefathers, "What sleekest thou?" We seek our brethren!! And we seek our brethren not only in resolutions, pronouncements and pleasing messages, but through dedicated and courageous deeds.

We must heed the call - For our humanity is at stake! ... The Jewish community must decide if and to what extent it will participate and help. It is a decision which tests not only Jews but Judaism. If we fail now when the test is so real, the tools so close at hand, the issues so clear, the good so evident and the need so great, we shall betray not only brothers, but ourselves and our heritage. If we respond courageously, we shall be worthy of all that we as Jews have experienced and fulfill a central demand of our faith.

(End of excerpted sermon)

In Deuteronomy it is written, *Tzedik tzedik tirdof (Justice, justice shall you pursue)*. How do we know what is just? We don't know what is just. The reason Tzedik is repeated is because we cannot just follow the laws of our nation or the rulings of the judges. We must listen to our hearts. Deuteronomy continues telling us to take especial care of the widow, the orphan and the stranger. We must always especially be aware of the weaker and marginalized people. We must be informed by our experience and education, but not stop there. Look again, review the situation, or as Hanan said, "be curious not furious". The answers of yesterday may not be today's answers, "Don't should on me and I won't should on you."

Hanan did not always succeed, but I've met few people with higher standards. See with an open mind, stay curious, and pursue Justice, Justice.