

HOLY INTERRUPTION By Rabbi Randy Fleisher

Niki Nymark, Yavila McCoy and I had the privilege of representing St. Louis at a recent conference in Chicago sponsored by the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. JCUA is an amazing organization; for forty years, they have been a strong Jewish presence in the struggle to make their city more just and compassionate. Their motto, 'Perpetual Motion' is apt-in the past year alone they have helped to organize tenants in areas threatened by gentrification, raised and then loaned millions of interest-free dollars for the development of affordable housing, and sponsored a Jewish-Muslim youth poetry project. Being around JCUA folks brought back fond memories for me of living in Chicago in the late 80's and being so impressed by this Jewish organization that was consistently mentioned by the press as among the late Mayor Harold Washington's strongest white allies (the fact that there were and are Jews of color as well as white Jews in the organization was probably too challenging to report). Their *yiches* (prestigious reputation) as an agent of social progress, needless to say, was well established.

Therefore, I was taken off guard at the very first session by a seemingly disturbing incident. We were spectators at a roundtable discussion with four Jewish activists, two women and two men, all passionate and committed. Near the end of the program a woman left her chair and began circling the table trying to get her hands on a microphone. I heard her say to the moderator, 'but this is really important and it needs to be said before everyone disperses.' After a while the people at the table relented and the woman forcefully spoke: "You're talking about us activists being shut out from the Jewish-Federation power tables—look at this table. There no Jews of Color, no Queer Jews, no Jews under 30...you too have excluded people from our own power table!"

At first, I was very uncomfortable. Many questions ran through my mind. Even if she had a valid concern, wasn't there another way to express them? Everyone here has the best of intentions; if we constantly argue about who to include, will we ever get anything done? But then I remembered the dismantling racism work we are doing together at CRC. We have learned that our own *sukkat shalom* is not yet free from institutional racism and exclusion. Even the most progressive of white, heterosexual Jews need to be interrupted, shaken out of our sense that everything is 'normal.' Author Paul Kivel, who was also at the conference wrote Uprooting Racism, the book many CRC members are reading together. In it, he devotes an entire chapter to our shared obligation to unabashedly speak out when we observe racial inequity and exclusion in our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, schools and places of worship.

There is a Jewish precedent for such behavior. Rabbi Arthur Waskow *midrashically* imagines that the *haftarah* for *Yom Kippur* was originally a speech with which the prophet Isaiah interrupted the *yontiff* sermon. "*Shrai Gevalt!* Is this what you mean by religious observance?" This he thundered at the

bewildered congregation previously quite satisfied with their prayer and fasting rituals. “This is what I truly desire for you. To share your bread with the hungry, to house the homeless, to comfort the afflicted.”

It’s miraculous what we can accomplish when we have the courage to forcefully speak out. Last year, our member Maris Berg expressed outrage that the playground fences in most of the city schools were covered with chipping, lead-based paint. “How can this be,” she demanded, “especially in a city already facing the horrible prospect of children testing positive for lead contamination in large numbers? Maris herself then brought together an interfaith group to repaint the fences at two city schools. As the Post-Dispatch recently reported, Maris’ action inspired the United Way to put their considerable weight behind being part of the solution. Our own Holy Ground group will be repainting at a city school the weekend of May 15-16; check inside the MEMO for details.

Yes, I am wary about adding to the coarseness and polarization that already exists in the public arena. As people of faith, we always need to be concerned about respect and love for others. Yet, when it comes to our efforts to realize racial justice, efforts I believe will surely lead to more peace and harmony, I am an advocate of ‘holy interruption.’

B’Ahavah (With Love),

Rabbi Randy