America’s Journey for Justice

By Rabbi Andrew A. Goodman

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” “Justice, Justice shall you pursue.” These three powerful verses from the Torah, among many others in the Jewish Bible, show a deeply held set of values that have shaped our tradition for three millennia. These verses were never meant to be mere platitudes. Rather, like all of the mitzvot, these commandments were meant to be internalized, acted out, and embodied in all that we do as Jews.

Love your neighbor as yourself... On Aug. 1, 2015, the NAACP started a 1,000-mile march from Selma, AL to Washington, DC. The purpose of this was to strive for Civil Rights, especially in the realm of education, the criminal justice system, job equity, and voting rights. We in the Jewish community have become more acculturated in the United States and have been privileged to receive great access to the public school system, protection under the criminal justice system, and unobstructed voting access. However, this is unfortunately not a given for all in our country. The rabbis teach that “Love your neighbor as yourself” means that what you would do for your own family is what you should do for your neighbor. Because we would not be complacent if Jews were being treated unfairly in the United States, it means that we must not rest if others are. It is for this reason that more than 200 Reform Rabbis joined in legs of America’s Journey for Justice. I was honored to be one of them, and I invited more than a dozen University of Richmond students, faculty, and staff to march with me.

Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor... The inequalities in our country at times breed resentment, at times contempt, and at times they manifest in much more brutal ways. It is not new information to say that the inequalities in our criminal justice system produce actual physical injuries and even deaths. While the Torah might have meant the “blood of our neighbors” as metaphor, in our society we must take this commandment as literal. For this reason, the UR community joined the march. The call for racial justice and the bloodshed connected to racial injustice is something we can’t abide. Students said they participated in the Journey because: “I face racial discrimination every day,” “My blackness is devalued every day,” and, “It gives me hope we will be able to live in a pluralistic society.”

Justice, Justice shall you pursue... On Sept. 12, the day before Rosh Hashanah, we marched. We joined about 80 others from Texas, Rhode Island, Colorado, and Virginia to lend our voices, prayers, and steps to the cause of justice. With us throughout the entire march, we carried an American flag and a Torah scroll – both symbols of justice for all. We were a group of all ages (10 - 85 years old), all races, and all religions. We chanted together, laughed together, sang together, and cried together. Most importantly, we shared the deep wisdom that each of our own destinies is inextricably intertwined with one another’s. After we finished, the march continued north for four days, ultimately ending in a large rally in DC.

Two-thousand years ago, Rabbi Tarfon said, “You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it.” We tried to pursue justice for the morality of our country. We tried to pursue justice for the benefit of future generations. And we continue to try to pursue justice because we don’t have any other option.
Jewish Identity After UR
By Lesley Shinbaum ’13

I can say with complete certainty that I am the person I am today because of my Pilgrimage: Israel experience. It has been over four years since I traveled to Israel, and I still have not been able to come up with the words to truly explain how much this trip meant to me. As a matter of fact, I never turned in my post-trip reflection essay because I could not think of words. The reality is that the person I was before I went to Israel no longer exists. The essence of my being changed, and, for lack of better phrasing, my mind is still blown. Before Israel, I was a child: confused, insecure, reactionary, easily influenced, and arrogant. Whereas now, I am the opposite. Over the course of the trip, my Jewish, Christian, and Muslim peers challenged me in ways I never thought possible, forcing me to reexamine the very foundation of both my identity and beliefs. Israel helped me develop a better understanding of myself while providing me with the perspective I needed to start living my life in a more meaningful and responsible way.

My undergraduate experience with the Chaplaincy, specifically with the Pilgrimage program, not only prepared me to be happy on a personal level, but has also prepared me to succeed professionally. It has been two and a half years since I graduated from UR and started my pursuit of a career in Democratic politics. I currently work as a fundraiser for Virginia Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam, and I am beyond grateful to have a job that I love. In my free time, I volunteer on behalf of Democratic candidates and causes, while also serving on the executive board of the Virginia Young Democrats. My experience with the Chaplaincy during undergrad helped me understand how my Judaism works for me, and, as a result, I have become more patient, levelheaded, empathetic, and mentally tough than I ever thought possible. In politics, every day presents a new challenge, and I am prepared to overcome each and every test by living in a way that embraces how traveling to Israel changed me.

EnRich programming for Older Adults
By Brian Strauss ’14

My name is Brian Strauss, and I graduated from University of Richmond in 2014. I am originally from Philly, and after a brief hiatus from the city of Richmond, I’m happy to be back as the project specialist at Jewish Family Services. At JFS, I have a number of tasks, but I mostly work on projects that help make the agency more efficient as well as community outreach initiatives.

One of these initiatives is a new program in partnership with the Weinstein JCC called EnRich. For the past few months, we have been putting on Food for Thought, a monthly lunch-and-learn that brings a diverse set of experts to cover topics related to aging for older adults and their families. However, thanks to a generous grant from the Jewish Community Federation of Richmond, we are expanding into a new program called EnRich. EnRich will be two hours of low-cost programs for these older adults that will take place after Food for Thought. The idea of EnRich is to have both an active and more sedentary activity happening that will cater to different people’s needs and interests. These programs range from Latin dancing to wine tasting, to a trip to the Virginia Historical Society to see the Downton Abbey exhibit.

One problem seniors have as they get older is isolation. As people become less active, lose their partner, or become more dependent on others, they start to become unable to keep their connections to the outside world. Therefore, we hope to offer seniors support and services to increase social connection and limit social isolation. Furthermore, EnRich programming will allow participants to try new activities and meet new people who might share similar interests. During Food for Thought and EnRich, a JFS social worker will also be present to answer any questions and help participants connect to resources. The purpose of this program, along with others that JFS has launched over the past year, is to help strengthen the Jewish community and let older Jews in the area know that we are there for both the good times and the harder ones.

To learn more about this program, visit the JFS website or contact me directly at bstrauss@jfsrichmond.org.

“My experience with the Chaplaincy during undergrad helped me understand how my Judaism works for me.”

- Lesley Shinbaum ’13 (pictured second from left)
New course in Jewish Studies: Jewish History and Memory: New York and Kraków

By Marin Kobb ’16

“Jewish History and Memory: New York and Kraków” explores the interwoven histories of American and Polish Jews since the 19th century. These cities are our focal points of study because of their unmatched quantity of Jews and vast cultural and intellectual impact on Modern Jewish life. So far, we have explored what Jewish life in Poland looked like and what pulled these individuals across the Atlantic to the shores of New York. Additionally, we have discussed what Jewish life was like in New York in the early 19th century prior to the arrival of Eastern European and Polish Jews and how these new immigrants would eventually weave themselves into the fabric of American life. In the second half of the course, we will study how Americans and Poles have memorialized pre-war, Jewish Poland, and the Holocaust. We will collaborate with students from Jagiellonian University in Kraków through Skype and a blog in order to enrich the discussion of Jewish heritage in both of these major cities.

Over Fall Break, we will travel to New York City and explore some of the places that we have studied so far in the course. We will have walking tours, visits to historical synagogues, tours of the Tenement Museum, the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and Ellis Island.

I took the course because of my interest in history and my religious observance of Judaism. I wanted to explore more of my own Jewish identity and what actually came to shape the modern Jewish culture that I am now a part of.

From the Rabbi...

Happy New Year! For us, we get to kick off the new school year and the Jewish New Year at about the same time every year. While it makes the first few weeks of classes hectic, it also creates a sense of new beginnings and exciting opportunities. This year we are lucky to welcome a large, vibrant cohort of first-year Jewish students who are ready to become the next generation of Jewish Spiders.

At University of Richmond, we create a space where Jewish students can practice and explore their heritage. However, our commitments to the students do not end there. We encourage our students to engage in the question of how their Judaism can help them engage with the university and the world around us. In this issue, you will see ways that our students and alumni are using their Jewish identity to work for the common good of the City of Richmond and our world.

I hope you have a wonderful High Holiday season. I pray that the year is one of blessing, health, growth, and peace for you and your families. Shanah Tovah Um’tukah – a Sweet and Happy New Year!

“I wanted to explore more of my own Jewish identity and what actually came to shape the modern Jewish culture that I am now a part of.”
Meet the Hillel Leadership Team

Name: Collin Zucker  
Year: Sophomore  
Hometown: Larchmont, New York  
Position: Social Media Coordinator
I manage the digital advertisements in the Tyler Haynes Commons and our social media accounts.

Name: Jack Mazzer  
Year: Sophomore  
Hometown: Wantagh, New York  
Position: Publicity Coordinator
I am responsible for SpiderBytes and sending out weekly emails informing the campus community of our Hillel events.

Name: Jeff Kreisler  
Year: Sophomore  
Hometown: Chappaqua, New York  
Position: Education coordinator
I coordinate all of the Tuesday night programming, which ranges from leading discussions about Jewish life on campus to decorating a sukkah for Sukkot or playing Jewish Jeopardy.

Name: Hannah Stein  
Year: Sophomore  
Hometown: Nashville, Tennessee  
Position: Ritual & Social Action Coordinator
I have the pleasure of organizing each Friday night’s “Welcome Shabbat” as well as “Shabbats on the Town.” I am delighted to be a part of the initiative to work with the Richmond community through social action and volunteering.

Name: Daniel Markowitz  
Year: Sophomore  
Hometown: Scarsdale, New York  
Position: Oversight Coordinator
I oversee the overall functioning of Hillel programming and events.

Name: Hannah Stein  
Year: Sophomore  
Hometown: Nashville, Tennessee  
Position: Ritual & Social Action Coordinator
I have the pleasure of organizing each Friday night’s “Welcome Shabbat” as well as “Shabbats on the Town.” I am delighted to be a part of the initiative to work with the Richmond community through social action and volunteering.

We Couldn’t Do it Without You

If you have any ideas for stories, know of Jewish alumni who are not on our list, or know of something great one of our alumni is doing, please give us a call or drop us an email.

Also, we would love to see photographs from your time celebrating the holidays or marking your Judaism at the University of Richmond.

All of our Hillel and Jewish Life events are provided free of cost for students, faculty, and staff members on campus. The programming is made possible through the hard work of the Office of the Chaplaincy and our wonderful on-campus partners. If you feel inclined to make a contribution to help us with our dynamic programming, please do so through the University’s secure website. Please select “Other” under the designation, and specify “Jewish Life.”

Thank you.