

Op-Ed: Black lives matter: A statement of Jewish solidarity

December 19, 2014

By Gazette Staff

By Rabbi Victor Reinstein and Rabbi Howard Jaffe

Massachusetts Board of Rabbis

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis reaches out in solidarity with African-Americans and with all Americans of conscience. We express outrage in response to the recent police killings of black males in our cities, two adults and a child, and deep concern over the failure of grand juries to indict. Grieving with their families, we honor the memories of Michael Brown, of Eric Garner, of 12-year-old Tamir Rice. We affirm what should be obvious: that black lives matter because all lives matter, each one created in the image of God. We are ashamed as Americans in needing to be reminded of such a basic truth, shaken from complacency to see through the lens of immediate trauma the pernicious effects of racism in the day-to-day lives of fellow citizens.

Sustained by Torah, we draw lessons from its teachings for the times in which we live. We learn of hard-heartedness from Pharaoh, of what it means to divide people into “us and them.” We learn from Pharaoh the arrogance of power and privilege, of hearts and ears that cannot hear a people’s cries for freedom and redress. From our ancestor Jacob, who wrestled in the dark of night, we learn the transformative power of humility, of what it means to step back from who we have been as individuals and as a nation and to embrace another way. Only in stepping back, in turning, in bowing our heads, can we then embrace another, honoring the space in which the other stands, the lives they live.

Filled with horror and heartache, we know as Jews what it is like when courts and police are not there equally for all, coming instead to be feared and avoided. We know what it is like to be marginalized, to be the other within cities we thought to be ours, within nations in which we thought we belonged. We dare not minimize the pain that is felt today by our African-American sisters and brothers. We are called to act in solidarity, to act for the sake of justice. “Justice, justice shall you pursue” is a mitzvah, a holy commandment that is meant to be heeded, not foreclosed upon by grand juries that preclude the pursuit of justice before a court of law.

Amidst the raw pain of grieving people, we acknowledge the danger and challenge that police officers face each day on our behalf and the ideals with which most have come to their calling. We recognize a larger system of racism and stereotyping that affects all of us. Reaching out from heart to heart, we are available as rabbis to offer counsel and comfort to those who serve our communities as police officers. Encouraging new ways of training and response in law enforcement, we also accept mutual responsibility for the reduction of violence in our society, and for bridging divisions among people.

As rabbis, we call on ourselves and on the Jewish community, through our congregations, our communal organizations, and our schools, to act and to educate for a more just and equitable society:

- To express solidarity with African-Americans in word and deed.
- To participate in interfaith coalitions working for justice and change.
- To explore the nature of racism in ourselves and our society, and to work for its eradication.
- To call for justice and accountability in law enforcement and the judiciary.
- To foster greater cooperation between citizens and police, helping to bring out the best in both.
- Not to wait for times of crisis to act.

Black lives matter because every life matters. With humility and hope, we reach out in solidarity, seeking the way of change and transformation, of justice for all.

This statement was issued on behalf of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis by Victor Reinstein, rabbi of Jamaica Plain’s Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue and chair of the Board of Rabbis Public Policy Committee, and Board of Rabbis President Rabbi Howard Jaffe.