A year ago, over Presidents' Day weekend,

I took a group of teenagers and parents,

down to my hometown of Tallahassee, Florida.

There we did some Hurricane Michael cleanup on the coast.

Those of you familiar with Florida geography –

might know that Tallahassee isn't exactly on the coast.

I had a lot of time driving to and from –

our volunteering locations

and I got to learn about the people –

who had chosen to come on this journey with me.

Those of you familiar with the geography of Florida –

Will recognize that, for these New Yorkers,

Tallahassee and its environs presented

an entirely different reality.

Growing up we often joked,

that, if Tallahassee wasn't the capital of Florida,

it would probably be the capital of Georgia.

Tallahassee is built on hills of red Georgia clay,

closer to Atlanta than Miami.

I loved growing up in the South,

Good food, good weather, good people.

I still love the South for all these reasons,

that's why I'm excited to come back here for another year.

But southern roots are a gnarled history,

Southern branches still sag with the weight of memory –

memory of the 'strange fruit' they once bore.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,

Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,

Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,

Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,

The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,

Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,

And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,

For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,

For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,

Here is a strange and bitter crop.

The song, Strange Fruit,

sung with haunting beauty by Billie Holiday,

was composed by a Northern Jew.

Abel Meeropol was a Jew from New York City,

disturbed by photos of a lynching,

he wrote strange fruit.

Meerepol taught English at the high school he graduated from,

among his students was

the civil rights thought leader James Baldwin.

This New York Jew helped to bring forth

one of the best-known civil rights protest songs,

and also, one of the most influential –

and poignant voices of the movement.

Meerepol was just one of the many examples –

of Jews who lent their pens and voices and bodies

to the struggle for civil rights for all in this country.

But it took proximity and exposure.

Jews had to understand the situation –

of our black brothers and sisters.

In some ways, even until today,

it is easier to see and understand that in the South.

But I say this having been a resident of New York City –

for the past 3 years:

the legacy of racism endures up North too.

In the south we may still see it on Confederate flags –

which still fly proudly and ignorantly.

We, and more so people who wear their identity on their skin,

still experience it in open animosity,

and polite distain.

The South, in many ways,

is still fighting,

fighting for our souls and our legacy.

It is an uphill battle for racial tolerance,

acceptance, and loving-kindness.

It is not an easy road,

But thank God, hopefully by now we know we're on it.

In the North of our country,

Racism is no-less systemic,

No less endemic,

It is only more insidious.

In the New York City, today,

We see it in the classrooms

of so-called elite institutions.

I’m not only talking about colleges and universities,

But, I could ad nauseum.

The children I teach at my congregation,

throughout their entire academic career,

are unlikely to have multiple black peers in their class.

Stuyvesant High School,

in the neighborhood most of my students live and go to school,

welcomed a freshman class of 895 students last year.

Only 7 of those 895 students were black.

In a city where black people make up 25% of the population,

last year, black students made up less than 1% of

Stuyvesant's incoming class.

This lack of representation only continues

in the hallowed halls of many storied institutions -

in and beyond New York City,

From preschool to college.

My students are smart kids,

many of them do or will attend –

elite institutions like Stuyvesant.

Many of them have already been or will be accepted

Into ivy league universities.

But with exposure to few black peers

they lack exposure to black issues.

I believe any issue of injustice are inherently Jewish issues:

Aware of this particular blind spot and deafness –

among my New York students,

this year we chartered our service and learning trip

to Alabama with the explicit goal

articulated by the Israelites

in this week's Torah portion: mishpatim.

n’aseh v’nishmah.

We will do and we will hear.

We will do good works and

we will hear the past and present experiences

of people whose voices have been suppressed or forgotten.

Our first night in Birmingham we began with n’aseh,

we will do.

Directly from the airport

we went to the synagogue and

took part in Friday night services.

V’nishmah, we listened to the experience

of our southern jewish brothers and sisters.

In doing so we gained an appreciation

for their past struggles and future aspirations.

V’nishmah, our New York cohort was

exposed to what it means to live

as a Jew in the American South.

The next day we began again with N’aaseh:

at 8 am on the Saturday of their break,

13 teenagers and their parents

left the comfort of their hotel and

spent the morning building ramps in

the economically depressed area outside the city.

V’nishmah, we listened to the people

whose quality of life was elevated by our doing.

V’nishmah, we listened to the remaining limiting factors

which we could never change in one morning.

N’aaseh, we spent the afternoon

at the Birmingham civil rights memorial center.

V’nishmah we heard the story of Ellen Erlich,

a Jewish woman whose father

got Martin Luther King of the Birmingham jail

and who had returned time and

time again to Birmingham

throughout her life because she refused

to be contented by progress made in other parts of the country.

N’aaseh,

on Sunday we solemnly walked across

the Edmond Pettus bridge.

V’nishmah, we heard stories of the lynchings and

the economic death suffered by Selma

when it refused to integrate.

N’aaseh,

on Monday we visited the Equal Rights Initiative’s

Memorial for Peace and Justice

and the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Civil rights

museum and memorial.

On that memorial two hands grasp together in brotherhood.

One of these hands wears a ring with a Star of David

as a reminder of the importance Jews have

and will continue to have in the civil rights movement.

V'nishmah, we learned from the SPLC

about the work which still remains.

According to modern scholar Avivah zornberg,

mishpatim is the ratification of the covenant incised

on the tablets of the 10 commandments.

Nahum Sarna points out that writing is

an integral part of this process of ratification in

ancient near eastern societies.

The medieval commentator, Abarbanel,

notes that by saying we will do

the people are agreeing to the original terms of the Decalogue

but that by saying we will hear

they declare themselves willing to hear more instructions.

Just as “we will do and we will hear”

is a commitment to a rearticulated relationship with -

the world of the past,

we must rearticulate and reconstitute ourselves

to the values of that past which allowed us to come this far.

We cannot become lazy in our pursuit of justice.

Rashi cites a famous midrash describing

the people's journey to the mountain in the previous portion:

"on this day, they came to the wilderness of Sinai:

Why on this day, not on that day?

To teach you that the words of Torah –

should be new in your eyes (and ears) each day."

But this commitment must go beyond laws and legislation;

the Maor VaShemesh challenges that

before the Israelites came to mount Sinai,

before revelation,

they had a spontaneous understanding that

they had not lived up to their commitments to God –

and to one another;

“a spontaneous resolution to imbue

old forms with new meanings;”

Zornberg says

“at base it is the desire for an existential,

transformative experience of laws –

of culture –

that opens the human being to a restructuring of the past

and the new dimensions of the future."

Parshat mishpatim reminds us

that revisioning culture is a constant process

of action, listening, and reaction.

We must act against injustice through legislation

but cannot rely on law as our sole mechanism.

Like the people of Israel,

we can intuit and imagine a way forward from injustice

from the bottom up just as effectively as from the top down.

When Moses reads the Torah to the people t

he people are galvanized to accepting not only what was,

but also, what can be.

Just as the text of the Torah was

apparent to the people before it was codified,

we are compelled to listen to and

accept the testimony and truth of those

whose experiences are yet to be codified.

Just as the Israelites opened themselves

to meeting and hearing the, capital O, Other at Sinai,

we must ourselves be open to meeting and hearing

all of the others in our lives.

Ethical revelation, like the revelation at Sinai,

is a constant process wherein the encounter of the other

requires humble and hospitable.

“We will do and we will hear.”

Before any calculation,

we must be committed to action and response to

our articulated responsibilities to our fellow human beings.

The Hasidic writer, the Sfat Emet, claims

that our ability to hear defines our destiny.

Our future is predicated on our openness

to the continual revelation of the not-yet-revealed.

Another Hasidic Master, Rabbi Nachman,

describes na’aseh v’nishmah as representing

the revealed and hidden aspects of our reality.

We must act on that which is revealed and yet

maintain open hearts to hear that which we have yet to hear.

Because February is Black History Month,

I want to leave you with the story

of a black hero of American history

whom we met on trip to Alabama.

Louretta Wembly,

who welcomed us with open arms to Selma

and shared her story with us.

Louretta has lived in Selma her entire life,

and is a lifelong member of 1st Baptist church.

She became a teacher, much like Abel Meeropol, a

t the same school she graduated from and

was one of the first black people in Selma

to become registered to vote

despite the unfair literacy test which

waylaid so many of her peers.

She was the first person in her family to get a vote,

but that wasn’t enough for her.

She opened up her personal and spiritual home

to the likes of SNICC,

the student non-violent coordinating committee

and Martin Luther King Jr.

(whom she lovingly referred to as ‘’Martin”)

As well as the rest of SCLC.

She partnered with them and others

to facilitate multiple critical voter registration drives

and the famous marches

across the Edmond Pettus bridge to Montgomery.

Louretta, to this day,

is undeniably a do-er.

She still welcomes groups,

including ours, from all across the country

who come to learn about the civil rights movement.

But she also exemplifies the later of na’aseh v’nishmah.

When you speak with Louretta,

no matter your race or creed,

she really hears you.

She is,

even after having lived a full and powerful life,

dedicated to the work of doing for others

and listening to others.

May we all strive to embody,

like our ancestors before us and

like the examples of living legends in this country today,

a never-ending,

unyielding commitment to the constant process of revelation.

May this process enable us

to embody the challenge articulated by Emma Lazarus

“none of us is free until we are all free.”