

Sermon: Fires in the Mirror
by Rabbi Arnold Saltzman
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Fires in the Mirror, a play by Anna Deavere Smith, is a remarkable accomplishment. It is a one-woman show where a solo actor plays over two dozen characters - both African American roles, and Jewish characters. Set in Brooklyn in a community where Hassidim and African Americans live close to each other. Years ago, as the neighborhood of Crown Heights continued to see white flight, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, decided that his community should remain there, keeping it together.

When our sons, Michael and Josh were students at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, DC, the Theater Department chair, Ken Johnson, received permission to perform this play with students playing the multiple characters instead of a one person show. Our son, Michael, played both Rev. Al Sharpton, and he played a rabbi. We asked Michael how it came about that he was playing Rev. Al Sharpton, since Michael is clearly Caucasian, and he responded 'They thought I did the best Rev. Al. Michael was on his way to being an actor.

Racial strife has surfaced in a big way this past year in Baltimore, Ferguson, Ohio, Chicago, New York, and other cities. What is going on? Anna Deavere Smith writes "My sense is that the American character lives...in the gaps between the places, and in our struggle to be together in our differences." The mirror allows us to look and to be understood.

In 1967-68, the Kerner Commission appointed by President Johnson concluded that "the United States was moving towards two societies one black, one white, separate and unequal." We would like to know what they concluded was necessary in order to prevent future rioting, such as the burning of Washington, DC which saw the arrests of over 6000 people.

The Kerner Commission concluded that there was no conspiracy, rather the result of a set of attitudes. The government needed to address employment, poverty, services, brutality, and they concluded that change would not happen without government intervention.

The riots in DC have taken over 50 years to recover from and mostly hurt African Americans. The riots caused a curfew and marshal law in this nation's capitol. In Brooklyn in 1990's when the riots occurred, tension already existed. You cannot have two communities living together without communication. You had a conflict waiting to happen with anti-semitism or at least anti-Jewish attitudes in

the community, and anti-black attitudes in the community. This was a volatile situation. Following the riots, panels were set up to work together, to communicate and to recognize the communities' diversity, so that issues could be discussed openly, and so that representation became less partial to one group or the other.

With the Thanksgiving holiday at the end of November, I want to make the observation that the good we experience as Americans exists along with the difficulties. The United States is not on Fire, yet a number of communities have been, and have expressed their outrage over the use of Racial Profiling, and unfair treatment which account for the fact that Black males are 6 times as likely as White males to be incarcerated at all age levels. Income gaps and education gaps have widened. Fewer than 50% of Americans think that progress has been made on this matter.

I have three books: One is the photographic History of the Civil Rights Movement - a collection of photos of demonstrations, many well known, with John Lewis and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Many of the photos are shocking as Jim Crow laws were confronted by demonstrations in a hostile and entrenched South. These are the disturbing images which we see in the news and are etched into the national psyche.

A second book I have is the collection of photos by Washingtonian and African American, Charles Scurlock. These are the photos of the beautiful African Americans, people who have achieved so much: Marian Anderson, opera singer; the patriotic Lt. and Mrs. U.S. Ricks; U Street with Billie Holiday; the March on Washington 1963; A ballet School; People at Work in the Bureau of Engraving; the Howard College Dramatic Club (Michael played there as well!); Duke Ellington; Ralph Bunch; Todd Duncan; Jackie Robinson; Mohammed Ali; Mayor Walter Washington. Barak Obama, Susan Rice, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell all arrived on the public scene after the Scurlock studio was no longer in business.

These are the names and lives of a few, but representative of the great contributions to American Society, representing the best in America. Does a people with such a record deserve to be treated less fairly than other Americans?

My third book is called 'Shared Dreams'. Like our ancestors who had visions and made covenants with God, so too we should renew our shared dream of putting out the 'Fires in the Mirror'. Our shared dream is one in which the Jewish community responds to our neighbors cry for help. It is one in which we communicate and participate in the making of a great society. We know what it is to be a people separated from the larger community and we were reminded of

this on commemoration of Kristallnacht. We must find a way, whatever way we can, to renew our shared dream of what this country, the United States, can and must be. The Hebrew Prophets spoke out against injustice. They belong to all people. We must find ways of moving towards the better self, the spaces between the letters in the Torah where we will find the passion of God, the inspiration needed to recognize that we have one Creator, and are descendants one Adam, one Eve. The spaces in the Torah, between the words and the letters, these gaps can help us discover how to live together in our differences, while being part of the same humanity. These are spaces between the letters where we find the fires of an eternal light.

Shabbat Shalom!