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The Messiness of Justice

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My eight-year old son's favorite book is *As Good As Anybody*. The first half follows Martin Luther King Jr. from his childhood in Georgia, listening to his father's sermons at Ebenezer Baptist Church, on through the bus boycott and the march at Selma. When he calls on all of God's children to join his plight, we enter the second part of the book where Abraham Joshua Heschel answers his call. Heschel was one of the greatest Jewish thinkers and activists of the past century, and the book takes us back to his childhood in Hitler's Germany. As a child, Martin Luther King sulks at seeing "whites only" signs, while Heschel flees Berlin after signs claiming "No Jews" allowed appear. The book ends with the two men marching arm-in-arm in Selma. Heschel writes of the experience that he felt as though his legs were praying. With this sentence, Heschel contextualized activism for his fellow Jews, and reframed and expanded the definition of "prayer" to include working towards social justice.

Before reading the story with my son, I worried he was too young to handle the maltreatment of each figure and the larger historical backdrop of discrimination and hatred directed toward particular groups — especially since he's a member of one of them. To my surprise, what upset him most was the tension in each story between law or authority and what is "just." Both King and Heschel have to disobey, fight, or flee from authority structures.

Children cling to an innate and clearly defined sense of justice. In fact, a strong and literal belief in justice and reciprocity is how theorists such as James Fowler label my son's current developmental task — what he must master at this developmental stage. It is this sense of justice that leads my son to simply state, "Well that's ridiculous that black people couldn't swim with white people," as if he has just solved a centuries old injustice in a moment. But in the next breath, he questions: "Why did she sit in the front of the bus if she wasn't supposed to?" In his mind, if a rule exists, there must be a reason for it and the person who violates that social contract is in the wrong.

I am challenged constantly by the question of how to raise our children with respect for authority, while not following it blindly — and when to fight against authority when it is oppressive. We've introduced the concept of "bad laws" into our family, which explains that a rule (or a ruler) is not necessarily just. Though I doubt that our children fully understand the nuance, we are at least introducing them to the concept of justice as complicated. When a system defines someone or some group as wrong, lesser, or even illegal, I want our values to guide us to challenge that system, even if we are not the ones being singled out. Some of our biblical stories and lore — Abraham arguing with God about Sodom; Moses leading the Israelites out of an oppressive regime to freedom; and the civil disobedience of the midwives Shifra and Puah against Pharaoh's edicts — teach us to struggle and challenge indecent human rulers and even God's rulings; and that behavior encourages us to be independent and critical thinkers. This is a deep value from our scriptures that I want to pass onto my children.

Our family spent considerable time talking about the issue of obedience and independence last summer. We celebrated the Supreme Court's decision to overturn DOMA, and we talked about the effect this would have on our two-mom family. One of our children surmised that, since there are wedding pictures in our home, we must have married illegally. "Why did we marry if it was against the law? Could we be sent to jail?" Once again, we talked about "bad laws," likening the bans on same-sex marriage to miscegenation (which did, indeed, lead to arrests) and ongoing racial discrimination.

But who gets to decide which laws or rules are bad, especially when a typical household raising small children is filled with rules — both unspoken and incessantly repeated? Do I want my children to challenge *my* rules or their school's rules? Just how free thinking should they be, and at what age?

In reality, if either of our children makes a cogent case against a specific house rule or punishment, we listen. We may not accommodate the request, but we want them to start flexing their civil disobedience muscles. They may feel, in fact, overly comfortable and confident challenging our rules, and, yes, I worry that a little fear and blind obedience could do them well. But overriding this concern is my hope that they will be inspired — like King and like Heschel — to challenge authority and join other peoples who are seeking justice. I want them to struggle with the reality that justice, like everything else, is messy.

Of course the reality is that this only gets more complicated as we get older. Justice is messy because we are unsure if it depends on perspective, or if it capital “T” “True” and eternal. The more we can tolerate nuance and multiple narratives, the more we doubt that we know what we know. And it is messy because it requires that we remember the words of Dr.King: The way things are is not the way they always have to be”. Each of us has to call on our own internal moral compass as a guide, and it’s not always so clear when we need to respect and abide by the existing authority structure, and when we need to recognize and challenge the cracks within it. We’d better be sure of ourselves, because when we do decide to act on what we believe is “right,” someone will inevitably be hurt by our action who, from her or his perspective, holds an equally valid viewpoint. Likewise, inaction will also cause harm, but we will protect ourselves from hearing the call of those who need us. Even as adults, we seek clear-cut answers — good guys and bad guys. My hope for our community is that we are creating an atmosphere in which we can find comfort sitting with the discomfort. And that when we do hear the cry of our sister and brother, we rise out of our complacency like King and like Heschel.