

"BLACK-JEWISH ALLIANCE BUILDING"

ROSH HASHANAH TALK

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CHERIE: When Al and I thought about what we wanted to share with all of you this morning, we thought we might tell you about our work around the world in bridge building. We could tell you about our personal understandings and analysis of Black/Jewish relations.

But what we decided instead that we wanted to share with you was our personal journeys -- spoken from our hearts. What led us to a commitment to do bridging work as an African-American man and as a Jewish woman -- and how we have found that being close to each other has been the most transformational way that we could work together on racism.

People ask me a lot, "Cherie, why do you do the work you do and when did you begin?" I never know how to answer the question when did I begin, because I feel like I was born leading this work.

I spent the first 15 years of my life in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, a largely Jewish, predominantly Orthodox neighborhood. I was ten years old, walking down the street, and I passed a Black woman on the street. We smiled and went on. But that evening I was sitting and having dinner with my family and I suddenly looked over at my father, and there was an expression I suddenly saw in his face (my father had lost a number of members of his family in the Holocaust). Something I saw in his face reminded me of something I had seen earlier in the day on the face of the woman I passed on the street. That realization started what became a lifetime commitment to doing bridging work between Blacks and Jews. As a result of that moment, I organized my Jewish youth group to initiate joint work with a Black church.

AL: As a small child growing up in the South I remember coming home one day and the grown folks in my family and my house were agitated, talking about something that had happened that day. It involved someone taking a courageous stand, doing something important, standing up to injustice.

And I remember as a little boy liking a lot to eavesdrop on those adult conversations. I wondered to myself, who was it that they were speaking of? And I thought, as a small child of seven or eight, well, it must be some big, strong man who spoke -- who would speak in a very aggressive, a very assertive, loud voice and who took a very strong principled stand and stood up with fierceness.

It wasn't until a little while later that I understood that the person they were speaking about was Rosa Parks, someone who unfortunately has been in the news again these days. Rosa Parks was a little like I was, she didn't speak in a loud, fierce voice, but she spoke quietly. Looking at her and learning from her example, I think I've taken away from that an understanding that the best work of all is bridge building work, because you get a chance to spread peace and love, and you can do it with the quietness and the stillness, that resoluteness and dignity best permits.

CHERIE: The other memory I'd like to recount was a discussion being held in my Jewish youth group about extending the period of time to hunt down Nazi war criminals. I was a very shy child; it was extremely difficult for me to stand up or to speak out loud what was in my heart, but after listening to the discussion -- I thought to myself, when you hate others, it poisons you. So I put up my hand and I said to the group that I thought we should forgive the Germans.

I lost several friends over that comment who never spoke to me again. As I've gotten older, I of course have come to understand the need for justice, for calling people to responsibility for their crimes against humanity. But I remember that moment as a young person -- the willingness to risk comfort, to risk losing friends, for speaking out for something that was in my heart. That moment of courage has had a profound impact on the work that I do now.

AL: I was taught at home by my parents to love all peoples. I didn't quite understand what that commission was all about. I was raised in a small town in Louisville, Kentucky, and I didn't often get to travel outside of my neighborhood. But one instance when I had an opportunity to see that commandment to love all people was an incident in my neighborhood after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. There were riots in my town and unfortunately in my neighborhood.

And I recall as a small child one evening watching all this mayhem going on outside of my house and I heard a loud commotion down at the end of my block where Mr. and Mrs. Rose had their grocery store. I guess nowadays we'd call that a mom and pop grocery store. They certainly were Mom and Pop to us; they really loved the children in the neighborhood and they were very kind and very generous with my family.

And I remember leaving my house and going out into the street, wondering what was going on, feeling both scared and apprehensive. And what I witnessed I will not forget: Mr. Rose was in the street crying, imploring the people not to destroy his store.

And I remember loving Mr. Rose. I still do. And I remember as he was waving his hands, asking people not to destroy his store, seeing the numbers etched on his arm, something he couldn't explain to me, something that I learned later, something that must have been his commandment, that even in the face of the worst of treatment to keep his heart open to love. I've not forgotten that example of love, and I try to live up to his example -- through our work.

CHERIE: When I was 15, my family moved to Los Angeles. It was 1965. Cities were burning across the United States, and I was deeply disturbed as a young person and trying to figure out what could I do.

So I began to attend White/Black dialogues at a place called Operation Bootstrap in Watts in Los Angeles. Operation Bootstrap was one of the forerunners of many of the Black empowerment organizations like Operation Push.

At one of these dialogues I met Lou Smith, the Director of Operation Bootstrap. He and I spent hours together, teaching each other about our respectful peoples. And then one day I invited Lou to come and speak before the seventh grade children that I taught at Leo Baeck Synagogue.

I will never forget Lou standing before those Jewish children and telling them that the most profound and powerful way that they could work against racism was to be proud and visible as Jews. And it was through Lou, my African-American friend and ally, that I found a way to increase my commitment to my own people.

Several years later, in 1969, I journeyed for the first time to Israel. There were many things I fell deeply in love with in Israel. But it was just following the Six-Day War, and I was deeply concerned and worried about the increased militarism, the pride in military solutions, and the increased divisions that I saw between Arabs and Jews.

I came home grieved in my heart and tried to find people in the Jewish community to talk to, but this was 1969 and there wasn't anyone in the Jewish community who could listen to my concerns. Who I found was my friend Lou. I sat in his office and I cried about my fears and my deep love and passion for Israel and my people. And Lou cried with me. It was only a few years since the death of Martin

Luther King, and he too was deeply worried and grieved about the rise of militancy in his community, in the Black community.

And that day I understood what being allies was about, that coming out of our histories as two oppressed peoples, there were things we understood that we could reflect to one another, ways we could help each other recommit ourselves to our own peoples that we could not yet find in our own communities.

AL: And I think back to the wonderful friends and connections that I've had with my brothers and sisters in the Jewish community. One that comes to mind whose name I remember and would like to pass on to you today was Ira Grouper. I was a young college student and looking for a place to apply my desire to see the world change and at that time in my community there was quite an uproar about the decision to bus students.

Well, unfortunately a number of violent incidents occurred. Children were hurt, buses were overturned, children had to face epithets daily as they went into schools. A number of us decided to form an organization to protect the children. And it was in one of those meetings that I met Ira Grouper. He was a young man, a little older than myself, and he impressed me because he stood up and spoke in a very clear voice about wanting to protect the children -- he had two children who were in school -- and wanting to listen to the children and take our direction from them.

Well, I made sure that I made his acquaintance and for the next year or two we were constant companions. I was often in his home, babysitting for his children and learning all about Jewish faith and Jewish people and radical politics and he was often in my home, helping me with my homework and learning about African history and African-American people.

It was opening our hearts to each other where I was able to learn the most.

CHERIE: I launched the National Coalition Building Institute ten years ago. It was my dream to build an organization that would train leaders around the world in healing tools and bridge building skills.

NCBI began doing Black/Jewish work on college campuses across the United States and then we spread to leading bridge-building work amongst all peoples and all groups. We now have chapters in 43 cities, and a particularly strong one here in the Washington, D.C., area.

And that takes me to the meeting with my buddy, Al Herring. Al came to NCBI about five years ago. He was a psychology professor at a small college in Indiana, and he was looking for ways to deal with diversity on his campus.

What I saw in Al was a powerful man, a powerful voice for African-American peoples. But more than that, what I saw in Al was a model of someone who understood that real power did not always come in loud noises, but real power came from a spiritual place in your heart. Al was able to model a compassionate commitment to his people alongside a deep understanding of Jews and other groups. I made a decision that he was the one I wanted as a partner to lead this work.

AL: Well, Cherie's right; five years ago we did meet each other and I too was moved by the example of leadership that she showed. I think what struck me the most about Cherie was her vision and her sense that you could vigorously, passionately, care about your people and also have plenty of room and heart left to care about other people.

The other thing that really moved me to want to work with Cherie and to want to lead all over the country and all over the world with her was her commitment to liberation and her ability to talk about what that would look like. Her vision has been something that I love standing close to, being in the presence of.

The other thing that has moved me in my work with Cherie has been her sense of tenderness and understanding that generosity is the most important salve where there is confusion or misunderstanding.

CHERIE: We have led many programs. One that I want to share with you took place at a university on the East Coast of the United States. A controversial speaker had been invited to that campus, and during his talk he was alleged to have said, "The only good Zionist is a dead Zionist."

A Jewish student stood up and said, "I'm Jewish and I'm proud to be a Zionist," and he was slugged. The incident hit the 6 o'clock and 11 o'clock evening news, and the university administrators decided they wanted to try to do something to initiate bridging work between many of the students, particularly the Black and Jewish students and faculty.

NCBI was invited to the campus, and as we got there, so did CBS and NBC and ABC camera crews.

At one point in the program we brought up the Jewish student who had been hit. I asked him to talk about what it had been like for him that day. He said to the group -- "My father left Germany in the late '30s and he always tried to tell me how frightening it had been to be a Jew in Germany in the '30s". The student said to the group, "I never understood what my father was talking about until the day I heard that speaker." And the student began to shake and to cry.

He finished his story and sat down. When I asked the group what had touched them or what had come up for them hearing his story, the director of the African-American Center who had invited the controversial speaker to the campus put up his hand. He looked over at the Jewish student and he said, "You know, when you were speaking I felt like I could remove your face and put a Black face there, and he'd be saying the same thing." And the student burst into tears.

The room was electric at that moment. We did many more speak-outs on both sides. And then a key turning point took place when we introduced what we in NCBI call the "controversial issue process." The group selected an issue they couldn't agree on and learned a process for building bridges. The issue they chose to discuss was whether or not controversial speakers that tend to divide Blacks and Jews should be welcomed on campus.

At one point in the dialogue, a number of the black students got up and looked at the Jewish students and said, "Don't you understand that when you tell us who to listen to, when you tell us who our leaders should be, all that we can hear is you are saying 'you are stupid, you cannot think for yourself, you cannot separate out what someone is saying.' That hurts us deeply. We experience it as racism."

And in turn, several Jewish students stood up, looked over at the Black students and said, "You need to understand that our history is a history of being told 'trust us,' and then being betrayed over and over and again. How can you just ask us to trust you without more concrete and substantive things with which to trust?"

As they began to understand the pain from racism and the pain from anti-Semitism that each carried deep inside, it was not difficult to take the next step, to decide as a group together to hand-pick several speakers, to invite those speakers and go together as a coalition, and teach each other what they needed from one another as allies.

AL: We're often called in to situations where there's a great deal of conflict and a great deal of contentiousness. One such situation was not too long ago when we were asked to come to the Hill to mediate a discussion between all the important members of the adoption field. Senator Metzenbaum and Senator Carol Mosely-Braun had proposed a bill that would address the issue of trans-racial, or cross-racial adoption. Many leaders in the adoption community took exception to the bill and they couldn't figure a way to move the discussion beyond the impasse.

We were asked to convene a day long summit meeting for all the folks from across the country who have major leadership roles in the adoption field. We worked with them on listening to each other and being generous in their listening. We helped them to reframe the issue of transracial adoptions in a way that included the concerns on all sides.

As we were closing, we asked folks to share what was powerful about the day. One woman stood up and said to someone whose policies were in direct opposition to those of her organization's (and they had been in opposition for ten or 15 years), she said, "You know, today I think I finally heard what you are saying. I don't agree with you, but I like you much better than I did when I came into this room, and on the basis of liking you, I'm willing to sit down with you and try to figure out how we can move ourselves beyond this impasse."

What that whole day taught us was that there is a tremendous value in listening, a tremendous dignity in holding your voice while another speaks, and that the application of generosity can bridge many gaps and many chasms. I think also that day showed us that if people are willing to listen, to stay in the same room and to stand face to face with each other, there's always a reason for hopeful and positive resolution of whatever the difficulty might be.

CHERIE: I have had many profound moments in my life. I have been in Northern Ireland, leading workshops for Catholic and Protestant families who have lost members of their families due to terrorism and violence in Northern Ireland. I was in South Africa the week Nelson Mandela was released, leading some of the first workshops between members of the Security Police and the ANC. I have led workshops for Israeli Jews and members of the PLO.

But I can say that as a Jewish person, one of the most profound contradictions to my isolation as a Jew has been the close, committed alliance with Al Herring. Early on, Al let me know that he understood many of the struggles that we have as Jews. He understood that Jews often get appreciated for being smart, competent, well organized, 'chutzpah'-dic, hard workers. But because of our history of oppression, we don't always know that we belong, that we are deeply wanted everywhere.

Al and I would be leading a workshop and someone would yell or attack us or say something a bit hostile. At the first appropriate moment, Al would whisper in my ear, "Cherie Brown, I think you're wonderful. I am so glad to be leading this work with you, you are the best." He would always remember that I was a Jewish person and that his reflecting that back to me made a profound difference for me.

AL: As an African-American, particularly an African-American male, my relationship with Cherie and her wisdom in understanding the struggles of African-American folks has been tremendously moving and tremendously important in my life. Cherie often leans into my ear and says, "Al Herring, I just want you to know that you're absolutely brilliant at this work. Those words are a wonderful contradiction to the way in which African-American men most often get mistreated in this society. We're often applauded for being charismatic or great speakers or athletic or handsome. Those things are nice to hear, but they don't really address the essence

of who I am or who other African-American men are -- brilliant and wonderfully able to think through tough situations and apply great thinking power to the resolution of the thorniest of problems.

Having someone like Cherie Brown in my life and having someone like Cherie to lead with has been a wonderful, life-changing experience. Having someone who is sensitive to the struggles of my people and someone who is committed to the liberation not only of her people but mine as well has been truly remarkable.

CHERIE: I really understood what this bridge building, alliance building, work was all about a number of years ago. I'd been invited to come to Birmingham, Alabama, where we launched the first NCBI chapter, to help the leaders in the city reach out to one another and begin to heal their history of racism. We held the program in the church where the bombing had taken place in 1963, and we had every religious leader in the city in that room.

At one point, a white woman stood up. She was teaching at the University of Birmingham and she said to me, "Cherie, help me. I feel like my Black students let me into the living room but not into the kitchen."

I never forgot that comment. Living rooms are polite, formal. Living rooms are where we tolerate one another. Kitchens are where we hang out. Kitchens are where we feed one another, where we fight with each other, and kitchens are where we show our real selves to one another.

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we Jews do what Jews are doing all over the world -- as we enter into the Yamin Noraim, the days of awe; we examine this past year with humility and courage, look at where we have come from, and make commitments for our year ahead. On this Rosh Hashanah, may each of us commit ourselves to bringing several people of color into our kitchens -- into our hearts. And in building these close personal relationships, we will be building that holy partnership with God, we will be doing what we are called to do, namely to participate in 'Tikkun Olam and to transform the world. Having personal, one-on-one relationships is the way that each one of us will change the world.

AL: I've had the great privilege of worshipping with you. I want to thank you for allowing me that privilege. I think that one of the most powerful ways to align your heart and spirit with others is to worship with them.

I want to share with you a little bit from my religious tradition. I am African-Methodist-Episcopal, sometimes shortened to A.M.E., and in my church on New Year's morning we meet early at sunrise. It's a very solemn service, very quiet,

followed by a very noisy and very raucous breakfast. What I will remember most from worshipping with you is the beautiful way in which you have approached your very solemn undertaking of looking at the previous year and the raucous, joy-filled way you have approached preparing for the upcoming year.

And lastly, in the tradition of the A.M.E. church, when you have really been with someone you can say that you have "witnessed" with them, that you stood with them, that you cried with them, that you said your prayers with them. The most blessed of New Years to all of you.

CHERIE: Good Yom Tov.