Civil Rights Martyrs--and Their Lesson for Us Today

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Rabbi Shaul Robinson delivered this sermon at the Lincoln Square Synagogue of New York City, on Shabbat October 25, 2014, Parashat Noah. The sermon is impassioned in its eloquence and profound in its message: a fine example of what a rabbinic sermon should be.

This week, we are commemorating the horrific murder 50 years ago of three civil rights workers, two Jewish and one African American, in Mississippi.

When I began reading up about the freedom riders, groups of mainly white young men and women from the north who spent the summer of 1964 in Mississippi working for civil rights, voting registration etc., and especially Andrew Goodman and Michael Shwerner, two amongst many Jews who were part of this summer, I had a hope.

I hoped that as I read about their background, and their murder at the hand of local police and officials, I would discover that they were motivated by their Judaism. Even if they were not themselves observant, I hoped that it would nonetheless emerge in their biographies that it was Jewish values – Hebrew school, a grandparent, a rabbi who had inspired them.

But I was wrong. The opposite was the case – they weren't at all Jewishly observant, had the most marginal Jewish education, did not credit or probably were not even aware of Jewish ethical teachings that led them to ultimately give their lives for the cause of civil rights.

But then I read something that shocked me. Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner may not have been Bible literate, religious people; but there murderers were.

One of the few people ever properly prosecuted for the events, one of the ring leaders, Edgar Ray Killen, was a part time Baptist minister. And almost all of those involved would have been church going, religion school educated.

How could that be?

If you look at Parashat Noah, there is something remarkable. Both the case for civil rights anti-segregation, and the case for slavery and discrimination, can be supported by verses in this week's Torah reading.

After Noah's episode of drunken shame, the Torah tells us that he cursed Canaan, condemning him to slavery. This became known among some interpreters as the curse of Ham – Ham was held to be the progenitor of the African race, who were black because of their sin. This was surely not a Jewish interpretation, but many clergymen and Bible-read individuals used this verse to justify the enslavement, deprivation, and sub-human status of Africans.

Yet, the same Torah portion also forbids bloodshed, murder; it teaches that all people are created in the image of God, and all human life, regardless of race or belief, is sacred.

So given that the Bible can bolster both human rights and slavery, how do we know who is right? Does the Bible, religion have no voice in morality, if it can be used to support polar opposite positions?

We know – know for certainty, that Goodman and Shwerner and Chaney were right – that segregation, the horror of the way black people were treated is against morality, is an evil that God must detest. We know this and we are right.

And one of the ways we know this is precisely because the freedom riders gave up their lives, did terribly dangerous things for a just cause, and were murdered. In their life, and in their death, we see how correct they were. The story of their lives helps shape our understanding of what values we should hold.

The generation of the flood was condemned because of hamas, violent robbery and crime that destroyed society and was purely evil. There was no Bible, no prophecy then – how were the people supposed to know that hamas was wrong, that they deserved to be destroyed?
The answer is that they should have known! Human beings are meant to be able to tell the difference between right and wrong; and moral blindness is not a defense.

And here I think is why the freedom marchers story is so relevant for us.

The Bible can be read in all sorts of ways. It can be read in a way that is contrary to its meaning, contrary to morality. But heroic deeds, people who live values, live moral lives help us see the difference between right and wrong.

What is important about Michael Shwerner and Andrew Goodman is not that they were motivated by, influenced by Jewish values - what is important about them is that they have helped shape Jewish values. They showed us more clearly, at great cost, what it is that God wants from us.
As we know the worst sin that a Jew can commit is a hilul Hashem, a desecration of God's name. The best we can aspire to is to be a kidush Hashem, to sanctify God's name by righteous deeds.

In the words of the rabbis, a hilul Hashem is something that causes people to say: what a terrible person, how shameful for his parents and teachers who taught him Torah. And a kidush Hashem is when people will say: what a wonderful person – how happy are his parents and teachers who taught him Torah.

And the freedom riders were a kidush Hashem. Because even if their parents did not teach them Torah, they showed the possibility of morality. Where before there was segregation, slavery, hatred, passivity – now – there is morality, solidarity, the image of God. Thanks to these men, goodness, morality, heroism, is an option, the power of good has been strengthened.

In a world of such immorality, of such evil, as we see all over the planet, the way we ultimately spread Godliness is not through learning but living, by demonstrating the possibility of good – there is no more compelling lesson than a lesson of a life lived properly,

I started my research hoping to discover that Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman were students of Judaism. I discovered that they were something far more important – they were teachers of Judaism.