

CHAIR CHAT

This is the first of what I hope will be monthly letters to the congregation about news, ideas and thoughts about world Jewry in general and the Har Shalom World Jewry Committee specifically. My goal is to stimulate interest and participation in activities, campaigns and organizations that enhance and support Jews around the world.

Fifty years ago Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited India. On October 7 of this year, the American Jewish Committee, the NAACP, USAsian and the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin remembered Dr. King's historic visit and message at a Capital Hill reception and awards ceremony. This event celebrated the partnership between the Jewish American, African American and Indian American communities. As an African American Jew, my attachment to the first two communities is obvious. And although I don't know where it came from, I've always had this fascination with India—history, architecture (seeing the Taj Mahal in the full moon is on my bucket list) and food (have you seen my pantry?).

The speakers list gave me even more incentive to attend. In addition to the expected representatives of the host organizations—the National Chair of AJC, African Americans congressman John Lewis and NAACP Washington director Hilary Shelton and India's Ambassador to the U.S. Meera Shanka—the lineup included South Africa's Ambassador to the U.S. Welile Nhlapo. (My passport has more entry and exit stamps from South Africa than any other country. To spend months traipsing around Cape Town is my idea of heaven.) Furthermore, as chair of the World Jewry Committee, I felt it my duty to show Har Shalom's support of AJC's programs. So, for all those reasons, this was an event that I felt obligated and grateful to attend.

One by one each speaker said essentially the same thing but not the same *old* thing. What the Jewish Americans and the African Americans and the Indian Americans (Jewish and Hindu) and the South Africans (black and white) said was, "We are the same." The Americans said we came to America by force or choice and survived hate and quotas to stand together as friends and colleagues, all citizens of the United States because people like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Abraham Heschel had the minds and words and perseverance to give us the courage and tools to make the journey. The South Africans – black Christian and Ashkenazi Jew – said they had overcome apartheid because they learned those same lessons and had been given those same tools by those same people.

Leaving the reception I felt gratitude and responsibility. What great fortune to be an African American and a Jew and a member of a congregation that would trust me to lead the World Jewry Committee. What a long list of to-dos that position presents.

As dedicated as Har Shalom's World Jewry Committee members are, there are more things going on with the Jewish Diaspora than a handful of people can do effectively. So if you have time, talent or information to share, please let us know by emailing us at worldjewry@harshalom.org. We Jews may have arrived at our destinations across the globe on different ships, but we're all in the same boat.

Yvonne Paretzky, Chair