

President's Column

by Patrick Dankwa John

"If the highest aim of a captain were to preserve his ship, he would keep it in port forever." - Thomas Aquinas, Italian philosopher

"The torment of precautions often exceeds the dangers to be avoided. It is sometimes better to abandon one's self to destiny." - Napoleon

This is my maiden voyage as skipper of the ship Decalogue. Even with binoculars or a telescope, I can only see but so far ahead of me out into the ocean. Everyone knows the Earth is round, but few realize that even with the most powerful binoculars, when standing on a ship, you can only see approximately 12 miles ahead. Why? Because the Earth is round, and our vision is linear. We can see what's in front of us, but we can't see what's around the curve.

We are always on the brink of confronting curves—the unknown. Nothing is more uncomfortable than the unknown. Recently, we have collectively been thrown several curves.

In his Fall 2014 President's Message, then Decalogue President, the Honorable Joel Chupack, prophetically sounded the alarm about rising anti-Semitism in the United States and abroad. Unfortunately, since then, we have seen things go from bad to worse. Since then, as a nation, we have been thrown many curves. Who could've imagined that there would be two mass shootings in synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway (a suburb of San Diego) and countless attacks on Jews all over the nation, even in New York City? Who could've imagined the case of George Floyd and the global protests it would spark? Who could've imagined the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed our nation's long ignored economic and racial inequalities? Who could've imagined a dreadful perfect storm: a health pandemic, an economic depression, rising racial and ethnic tensions, and plummeting public confidence in the American president's leadership ability? There's so much going on, it can be overwhelming, exhausting, daunting, and paralyzing. There's so much going wrong that we can feel that our contribution will be meaningless—just a drop in the bucket. One of our missions is fighting against anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry. How exactly do we make a dent in those problems that have plagued us for thousands of years, while we're in a pandemic? I don't know what the answer is, or where it can be found. But I do know where it won't be found. It won't be found in our comfort zone. It will be found somewhere beyond our current range of vision. Somewhere beyond the twelve miles that we can see in front of us.

Albert Einstein said you can't solve a problem with the same mindset that created the problem. Just last week I had a conversation with another lawyer about what role bar associations can play in fighting bigotry. She mentioned some ideas her bar association was considering. I asked her what her bar association was planning to do or say about anti-Semitism that hasn't been done or said in the last 1,700 years? What did they plan to do or say about White supremacy that hasn't been done or said in the last 400 years? She gave a floundering response. I wasn't trying to be a wise guy—I was trying to make the point that comfort is the enemy of progress. Whatever the solutions to bigotry and injustice are, they are guaranteed to be unorthodox, novel, radical, and controversial. If that were not the case, then the problems would've been fixed by now. Are we willing to be uncomfortable, to set a course beyond our twelve-mile vision, to do things that have never been done? Discomfort is the price we must pay to bring more justice to the world. Discomfort, and lots of it. Tikkun Olam isn't cheap.

In the late 1800's, Theodor Herzl (the father of modern Zionism) founded the World Zionist Organization. Herzl's efforts were initially met with great resistance from the Jewish elite. Most Jewish leaders, the wealthy businessmen and the rabbis, bitterly opposed Herzl. Herzl's Jewish bosses even fired him from his job as a journalist at a Jewish paper because they disapproved of his Zionist activities. But the Jewish poor loved Herzl from the beginning. Why the gaping chasm between the poor Jews and the elite Jews? Comfort.

The Jewish elite wanted Israel to be a Jewish state, but they were unwilling to risk the ire of the Christians. They told Herzl that the Jews were doing just fine in most of Europe at the time, and they didn't want to do or say anything controversial that would draw attention to the Jewish community. Herzl ignored his critics and continued to fight for the cause of

Zionism. His initial base was poor Jews, but over time his popularity mushroomed across the Jewish social strata. Eventually, many of his detractors became his supporters, and as they say, the rest is history.

Decades later on another continent, some Black leaders in America faced a similar challenge. In 1948 a small Black church in Alabama hired an old Black preacher to be their new pastor. Most of the church members were college educated Blacks: lawyers, doctors, accountants, teachers, etc. It was a church of the Black elite. They knew they were the cat's meow, and they made sure everyone else knew it too. They were pretentious and self-righteous. Plainly put, they were a church of snobs. The old preacher they hired was considered one of the best Black preachers in the South. He had good pedigree. He was no storefront preacher. He was a man of letters, attended the University of Chicago, and was fluent in Greek and Hebrew—a rarity for Black preachers even today. He was considered one of the best Black orators in the South. Among Black preachers, he was a giant in a land of grasshoppers. What more could a church of snobs ask for? So they hired him. There was a problem though.

He hated racism as much as he loved the gospel. His sermons often contained diatribes against segregation. This made the deacons very uncomfortable. They told the old preacher that they were trying to get along with the Whites in town, and he was causing trouble by publicly complaining about Blacks being lynched and getting beaten by the police. The deacons of the church begged him to stop speaking out against racism, segregation, and police brutality. When begging didn't work, they ordered him to stop. When that didn't work, they fired him. Now they needed to find a new preacher.

The deacons decided in selecting the old preacher's replacement, they would learn from their mistakes. Now they didn't want a preacher who was experienced and in high demand. Instead they chose a young unknown man—he was 26 years old, had never pastored a church and was fresh out of seminary. He would be happy to just have a job—any job. The deacons were confident they would be able to mold and control this young preacher. You may have heard of him. His name is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Well, things didn't go quite as the deacons planned. Most people don't know Dr. King wasn't just unpopular with White preachers, he was also unpopular among most Black preachers. Chicago's Reverend Clay Evans, who died in 2019, was one of the few Black pastors who publicly supported Dr. King when he came to Chicago. New York's famous Reverend Adam Clayton Powell referred to Dr. King as "Martin Loser King," and threatened to start a rumor that King was having a homosexual affair with one of his workers. All this to keep King out of New York City—Powell's turf.

As we work this bar year on the myriad challenges facing our profession and our nation, let's remember great leaders like Herzl and King. They took calculated risks for the sake of justice. Had they not been willing to endure being laughed at and ridiculed, where would Blacks and Jews be today?

Remember their sacrifices and the sacrifices of countless others, who made our present comfort possible. Consider what we owe the younger generation to whom we will pass the baton. In our struggles, we will at times feel anxious, worried, and scared. It's like going to the gym. If it doesn't hurt a little, then you're not doing it right.

How can we remain buoyant and optimistic in our work? Rabbi Binyomin Scheiman said it best. During my installation ceremony in June 2020, Rabbi Scheiman explained that in our efforts to achieve Tikkun Olam, we are not spectators at the arena—we're players. Spectators have the luxury of leaving the arena before the game is over. Spectators can leave if they're tired, or if the game is boring, or if their team is losing. But the players have to stay and keep playing until the game is over.

In our endeavors to bring Tikkun Olam into the world, when is the game over? It's never over. We have a responsibility to do for others what our ancestors did for us. They kept playing until they couldn't play anymore, and then they passed the baton to us. Let us do likewise. I look forward to working with you all this bar year. Let's get uncomfortable.

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