

**JEWISH LIVES MATTER 3 - A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF AMOS**  
**AMOS 5**  
**AUGUST 21, 2016**

The Rio Olympic closing ceremonies will happen tonight which means many things. We can all return to regular amounts of TV watching and not a 24/7 obsession. It means the huge amazing moments of victory and sportsmanship have come to an end. It also means the constant swirl of controversies can come to an end. Whether it was the pollution in Rio, the violence in the streets or the green diving pools, we can give up on the endless conversations about controversies.

My favorite controversy is one that pops up every few Olympics and it includes a snafu on the podium stand. This year, Gabby Douglas and Michael Phelps got stung by this controversy. After the American women won the gymnastics-all-around event, the five star athletes took to the podium to receive their medals. As the national anthem triumphantly played, all of them covered their hearts but one, Gabby Douglas did not cover her heart while the national anthem played, and it was an instant controversy. What disrespect! This is a shining moment as an American and she stood at attention and solemn, but she did not cover her heart.

After winning one of his truckload of medals, Michael Phelps was seen with his hand over his heart standing at attention. He was also seen laughing during a portion of the song. He too was criticized for not respecting his country nor respecting his flag. Who was right and wrong here?

Francis Scott Key originally penned the Star Spangled Banner during the War of 1812, and it began to be used by military forces during important ceremonies as a reminder of military resilience and hope. Not until 1931 did the Star Spangled Banner become the national anthem. Meanwhile, the Pledge of Allegiance began in classrooms in 1892. Procedures for these two patriotic recitations were not originally included. In 1923, the

Flag Committee put forth rules including during the Pledge of Allegiance that you should put your hand over your heart and raise your hand in a Bellamy Salute when the words “to the flag” were mentioned. You can guess that the Bellamy Salute lost favor pretty quickly. Over time, some tradition has moved away from the flag code to emphasize a hand over your heart during the pledge and singing during the national anthem.

Meanwhile, in light of First Amendment rights, nothing is required, but that doesn't really help out Gabby Douglas or Michael Phelps. The great irony is that two of the most decorated and successful American Olympic athletes were deemed unpatriotic. A black woman and white man, who have given thousands of hours to train themselves for a moment of American glory were put under a microscope and deemed unpatriotic because they didn't cover their hearts which the flag code says to do. But the flag code changed, and before it changed, it didn't even exist. After it changed, the culture changed and regular practices changed. The real issue is their hearts and what their actions say. What is more patriotic, giving your heart, body and soul to compete in the Olympics or a momentary flub where you didn't cover you heart?

That's a great question that could be repurposed in many ways. The majority of people would be happier if Gabby covered her heart. It's the optics that matter. She could be a terrible person with nothing but contempt for this country, but if she covered her heart, all would be forgiven. Conversely, if her heart was filled with American pride backed by her long-standing support of this country but she forgot to cover her heart, people would be flabbergasted.

For some reason, people are like that. We are wired that way. Amos bumped up against the same idea with far more at stake.

*Amos 5:21-23*

The Israelites have the optics down. They are fulfilling the law of God. God commanded feasts and solemn assemblies. He required burnt offerings, grain offerings and peace

offerings. He called upon them to sing songs and worship gladly, and these same things he requires, he despises. Why?

We are in the final week of our series, *Jewish Lives Matter*. At the heart of this brief series, we are looking at the sermons of Amos to the people of the Northern Kingdom. The people of Israel are successful and financially well off. We read in other parts of the book that they have beautifully appointed homes and second homes. They have the best food and wine. They enjoy excellent entertainment. Their lives are blessed, but there is regional unrest from violence and incursions from the surrounding nations. The Israelites have deemed themselves worthy and righteous and they have deemed their neighbors as those whom God must strike down.

Central to all of this is the Israelites misguided assumption that since they are the chosen people, whom God favors, since they are financially well off and upholding the religious festivals, that God will quell the unrest by defeating their enemies. The mantra on their lips, in one form or another, is that Jewish lives matter. Because of this God, will defeat his enemies and honor their actions. Ironically, the book of Amos is about God defeating his enemies. They just don't realize it is them.

Today, we come to the sobering passage that essentially says you can do everything right and still be wrong. More specifically, you can do everything religiously right and still be wrong.

Then Amos offers the antidote to their problem. He offers a corrective to their worship.

*Amos 5:24*

This is a foil to all that has gone before it. It is the subtext for all that is wrong with their worship. Amos calls upon them to pursue justice and righteousness. Justice here is *mishpat*, it is the entirety of God's law in the world. It is things as they should be. Righteousness, a word we have made overly religious, is just what its etymology implies, rightness

embodied. Judgment and righteousness are closely affiliated. They mean things as they should be. They could easily be included in the concept of Jesus' prayer to make it on earth as it is in heaven. That's what the Kingdom of God is - bringing up there down here.

At the height of the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King was thrown into the Birmingham prison. He was placed there for peaceful nonviolent protests. His opposition at this point could easily be embodied in Bull Connor, the powerful, vociferous opponent to African Americans. He was also the Commissioner for Public Safety in Birmingham. Bull wasn't his real name; it was Theophilus, love of God. He was a leader in his church and an upstanding voice in his community. By all rights, he stood for righteousness as a leader in his church and justice as a civil servant. And yet he turned dogs and fire hoses on people. Those are the public things we know of. Dr. Martin Luther King opposed this man and what he stood for, and he was thrown in jail. While he was in jail, many clergymen rumbled against Martin Luther King for his audacious and public acts of confrontation preferring that he negotiate or acquiesce. That led him to write his famous *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*.

As I re-read that famous letter, I was struck by many parts of it. But one passage stood out:

*I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years, I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.*

While doing a sermon series on race in a largely white church, I have been thrilled with the response, many people affirming the messages and exhortations. People being honestly challenged by the stories they have heard from others in our church. Many of you have asked and wondered, "So now what?" 1) Awareness is a success unto itself. Being aware and seeing things with new eyes is a huge step forward. 2) But to Dr. King's point, it is not enough to agree but provide little action.

As I have alluded to a few times in this church, I was somewhat self-sufficient in paying my way through college. I am proud of the work I did, but it led to a flawed value. A perception that through hard work anything is possible and everything should be even, and for that reason, as a high-schooler and maybe into college, affirmative action made no sense to me.

Then an image was raised in that class. Imagine the Oakland A's and San Francisco Giants play a 150 year long baseball game, the Giants with their massive payroll and the A's with their puny one. The Giants with their superstars and the A's with relative nobodies of minimal star-power. Now imagine that the A's have one hand tied behind their back for the 150 year long baseball game. Can you imagine the score after 150 years? It wouldn't be close. Now imagine after 150 years, the A's got their hand freed. The playing field is seemingly level. Would you think it fair to play the game as is from that day forward, after such a head start, after such an advantage?

Hearing that changed me, then I really began to think about it. Even to this day, no matter how just or right we think things are, they are not. The National Bureau of Economic Research did a study in 2016. They sent out resumes with comparable qualities but one important difference, the names at the top. On some they used more white sounding names like Emily Walsh and Greg Baker, on the others, more specifically African American sounding names like Jamal Jones and Lakisha Washington. They found the white names needed to send out 10 resumes for a call back. The same qualified African American names needed to send 15. That's a 50% difference.

In a similar vein, Forbes Magazine did a study in 2015 and found that black households on average have 6% of the wealth of white families. Put another way, the average white family has 16 times the net worth of the average black family. Now then, if we are all created in his image, all men are created equal, maybe there are some lingering effects of centuries of oppression. It isn't enough to release their hands and say, "Play ball."

I don't know exactly what this means for your personal life or business, but it has to mean something. It is a scary thing to me to do religion well and miss justice. Justice isn't just about human trafficking. Justice is about the economic systems that benefit us. It's about the system that benefits one group and represses another. If you are willing, consider these ideas, do something bold. Reach across the aisle. Reach across the city and help even the score.

Before Gabby Douglas and Michael Phelps bungled the national anthem, three men utterly stood in opposition to it. Tommy Smith and John Carlos, both SJSU alums stood on the podium after winning gold and bronze in the 1968 Olympics, and they raised their gloved hands to the sky. This was at the height of the Civil Rights movement. Almost 50 years ago people thought this was egregious. They were promptly banned from the Olympic Team and the Olympic Village. I don't know what you think about this bold moment.

Disrespectful? Maybe. Not the right time or place. Maybe. These men didn't cover their hearts. It was deemed unpatriotic. I can honestly think of nothing more patriotic than a statement like this.

This act makes me think of Jesus. He broke the rules in front of the Pharisees time and again. Why don't your disciples wash their hands before a meal? Why do your disciples glean on the field during the Sabbath? Why do you heal on the Sabbath? And best of all, it was written that everyone is cursed who hangs on a tree. Jesus was killed for being a lawbreaker, even in his death, he hung as one cursed by the law. Jesus refused to play by the rules because he knew good behavior wouldn't lead people back to God. He fought for what mattered. He gave himself up even though it cost him everything. Jesus went to the cross because all souls mattered, and he calls us to do the same.