



Advocacy Update

Sent January 8, 2015

by [Rachel Chung](#), Eisendrath Legislative Assistant, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and Women of Reform Judaism

Happy New Year! Only a few days into the year, 2015 has already been packed with exciting social justice progress for WRJ and the Reform Movement. First, making a statement to start the New Year—literally!—the WRJ Executive Committee this week passed one on [The Crisis of Racial and Structural Inequality in Law Enforcement](#). The statement comes in response to the string of high-profile, deadly shootings by police officers and the violent protests that followed.

Next, in Washington, D.C., the Religious Action Center (RAC) welcomed Rabbi Jonah Pesner as its new director. Rabbi Pesner succeeds Rabbi David Saperstein, who stepped down after 40 years of devoted service following his confirmation as the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Rabbi Pesner is an accomplished advocate with broad experience leading social justice campaigns, and he comes to the RAC with a mandate to deepen its advocacy work while mobilizing the Reform Jewish community and its allies. To read more about Rabbi Pesner and the exciting changes at the RAC, including wonderful reporting from *The Washington Post*, [head to the RACblog](#).

Lastly, turning our attention to Israel, we learned earlier this week that a transgender woman was turned away from praying at the women's and men's sections of the Western Wall. We are profoundly disheartened that prejudice and discrimination continue to prevent equal access to Jewish holy sites in Israel. [RAC Eisendrath Legislative Assistant Jonathan Edelman wrote a poignant piece](#) reflecting on his own experience at the Wall, reminding us that we must continue to work for pluralism and equality in Israel so that all may enjoy equal rights in the observance of our faith and tradition.

More on the WRJ Executive Committee Statement: [The Crisis of Racial and Structural Inequality in Law Enforcement](#)

The Reform Jewish Movement has always been actively engaged in the critical social issues of our time. Since our founding in 1913, Women of Reform Judaism has been a Movement and community leader in this work, deeply committed to civil rights, racial equality, and criminal justice reform. These key concerns, all intricately intertwined, are resurfacing as prominent, national issues following the string of highly publicized police shootings.

It is clear that in Ferguson, in Staten Island, in Cleveland, and in countless communities around the country, the relationships between law enforcement, public officials, and community members have been terribly damaged by mistrust. Through the WRJ Executive Committee Statement, we acknowledge the tragic results of this mistrust and renew our commitment to combatting the structural and racial disparities that persist in our country. The statement, entitled “The Crisis of Racial and Structural Inequality in Law Enforcement,” reflects shared sentiments from a recent [Union for Reform Judaism North American Board of Trustee Resolution](#) on the same topic passed in December 2014. The WRJ statement reads, in part:

The recent cases involving Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, as well as other incidents in cities across the United States involving the use of deadly force by police, dramatize ongoing challenges that must be addressed in our communities. While these cases differ, common threads run through them: economic, social, and racial disparities that deny opportunities to individuals of color and erode families and communities; the violence plaguing too many low income and communities of color; the violence faced daily by law enforcement, leading some police to view too many in communities of color with suspicion and even hostility; proper training and procedures for police officers in de-escalation techniques and minimizing the use of

For more information on WRJ and Social Justice, visit www.wrj.org/social-justice-home

deadly force, and the disparate treatment that grand juries and prosecutors too often give to police versus civilian crime suspects.

We need systematic change. We know that racism still runs deep in our society, and that the inequalities to which it leads violate our fundamental belief that all people are created *b'tselem Elohim*, in the image of the divine (Genesis 1:27). We must work within our own community and with our neighbors to combat structural racism and its manifestations: from racial profiling and police brutality to voter suppression and income inequality.

We also mourn the loss of New York Police Department officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, whose killer invoked the names of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in his deadly rampage. We vehemently condemn such acts of violence and are deeply grateful to the thousands of officers who risk their lives, and who sometimes make the ultimate sacrifice, to help protect our communities:

Law enforcement officers who risk their lives each day to ensure our safety deserve the respect and appreciation of all Americans. Their work is challenging and the decisions they are forced to make are difficult. We deplore acts of violence directed against police and other law enforcement personnel, no matter what perceived injustices are being debated in the public square or attributed to police misconduct.

We know that even in response to violence, violence is not the answer. It is important to distinguish between meaningful, effective action to combat systemic inequalities and the perpetuation of senseless violence against individuals working within that system. As the WRJ Executive Committee expressed:

Even as we reaffirm our respect and appreciation for law enforcement personnel, we must acknowledge the long-standing structural injustices, particularly concerning race, that impact law enforcement, impair judgment, and plague our society, including our criminal justice system.

The women of WRJ have long been active in the fight against discrimination and for the betterment of society through the expansion of rights and freedoms. We have [led the Reform Movement in our support of civil rights](#). We draw from these tragedies a revitalized commitment to justice and equal treatment for all, especially in the interconnected realms of criminal justice and police and community relations. As Jewish women, our obligation to the Jewish mandate of “*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice you shall pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:18), compels us to fight to bring justice and equality to all people.

WRJ and the Reform Movement have a wealth of resources for advocacy and programming on civil rights, race relations, and community-police relations. For programming with your sisterhood, check out [WRJ's programming guide on the 2013 Assembly topics—voting rights and the school to prison pipeline](#)—to highlight how these issues relate to civil rights and community-police relations. The [RAC's webpage on Black-Jewish relations](#) also has excellent advocacy resources and educational information about the Reform Jewish Movement's advocacy during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and today.

So, what else can we do? In the United States, the 114th Congress is just beginning; we must seize the opportunity to raise our voices to ensure we continue to progress toward civil rights for all. To start, [urge your Members of Congress to support the End Racial Profiling Act](#), which would legally prohibit racial profiling, ensure specialized instruction in federal law enforcement training, condition state and local governments' receipt of federal funds on the successful adoption of anti-racial profiling policies, award Justice Department grants to state and local governments that best implement practices that defeat racial profiling, and position the U.S. Attorney General as watchdog to assess such practices.

As we continue in the New Year, let us recommit to action. To address these injustices is an overwhelming, yet imperative task. Such a challenge requires reflection and commitment at the individual, community, and society-wide levels; we *all* must do our part to create change.