



Parshat Hayyei Sarah
November 14, 2020 — 27 Cheshvan 5781
Keep Walking
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Today, I want to share the story of a woman who stood in the shadows of history, but whose vision, whose courage, whose convictions have paved the way for generations. We always talk about Ruby Bridges. We never talk about her mother.

Lucille Commadore Bridges, who passed away this week at the age of 86, grew up in Tylertown, Mississippi. She was the daughter of sharecroppers and dreamed of a world where she could learn and grow and become everything she was meant to be. But that world was not her world, and though her parents dreamed of a better life for her, reality limited her opportunity. After the eighth grade, she was forced to leave school so that she could help her parents in the field. She grew up, hemmed in by Jim Crow and blatant racism. She became a housekeeper, married a mechanic, and saved away her dreams for her children.

Ruby Bridges was born the same year the Supreme Court struck down public school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. While some families waited to see what would unfold, while some chose to wait until it would be safe for their children to attend integrated schools, Lucille was already making plans for her daughter. She moved the family from Tylertown, Mississippi to New Orleans where she knew the schools were better and worked to make sure that her daughter could be one of the first to attend a formerly all-white school.

At that time, despite the Supreme Court ruling, schools weren't just letting black kids attend. They created all these barriers. There was a test. A hard test. A test designed to make it

seem like black children couldn't attend white schools because they weren't at the same level. 165 black children took the test. 5 passed. Ruby was one of those five.

Lucille and her husband went to meet with the superintendent at the all-white William Frantz Elementary School to enroll their daughter. As she tells it, the superintendent was warily supportive. He told them that since they were praying people, they should get to praying because things were about to get a lot worse. They knew there would be violence. Only after the fact did Lucille learn that people were planning to kill her.

How do you prepare for that moment?

I can't imagine what it would be like to walk in their shoes in that moment. I can't imagine how you prepare. I think about the moments in my own life when I've faced an uncertain future. My mind quickly spirals to all the worst-case possibilities. I keep myself up at night worrying about things that probably will probably never come to be. I tell myself this is a helpful coping mechanism. If I think of all the worst-case scenarios, then I'll be prepared. I'll be able to figure out solutions and know what to do. And there's something sadistically calming about "doom scrolling"—reading article after article that help you to imagine dire possibilities that you've never considered.

I'm no parent, but if I were going to apply my own coping mechanisms to a child, I could imagine sitting a child down and saying something like, "honey, we're going to be going to school in a couple of weeks and it may be a little scary, but you're going to be alright. You're going to make it through. We're going to make it through together."

In 1960, Lucille and her husband, Abon, knew to some extent what they were walking into. They knew to some extent what they were signing their daughter up for. And like every

parent, they were determined to do everything in their power to make sure that Ruby had a successful experience at school. So, what did they do? What did they tell her?

Absolutely nothing. They told her she was going to be going to a new school. That was it. No warnings about violence. No warnings about people who weren't going to like seeing her. No warnings about police or guns or fear. As Ruby shared, "they didn't try to explain to me what I was about to venture into...but I think that's because it would be hard for any parent to prepare their kids to walk into an environment like that, so they didn't try."

It turns out, not telling Ruby what to expect on that first day of school was helpful. Not knowing what she was walking into, she didn't spend time worrying about all the things that could happen. That meant that her first day of school was a new experience, not something she was dreading. When she walked with her mother and the federal marshal on that first day of school, when she heard people screaming "two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate!" and racist slurs and threats, when she saw mobs of protesters and people throwing tomatoes and eggs and bottles, she didn't see those mobs as realizations of her worst nightmares, she just saw them for what they were. The only time she was really afraid, she shared later, was when she saw a woman carrying a black baby doll in a coffin. That was scary. But her mind didn't have time to wander. Her mom took her by the hand and walked her forward.

Keep walking.

Ruby spent a year walking through that mob. A year of tomatoes and eggs thrown her way. A year of racial slurs. A year of indignant white vigilantes camping outside her home throwing bricks. A year of guns pointed at her and to protect her. A year of walking to that white school to learn by herself with the only teacher who was willing to teach her.

Keep walking.

Abon was fired from his job as a mechanic. People threatened to kill him, threatened to kill Lucille, threatened to burn their house down with them in it. Friends in the neighborhood stood guard outside their home, making sure they made it through alive. When Lucille would try to go grocery shopping, grocers would refuse to sell to her. Her parents, still working as sharecroppers in Tylertown, Mississippi, were evicted from their land with nowhere to turn. The NAACP had to support them for several years because they had nowhere to turn and nowhere to go.

Keep walking.

Today, we feel as though we are living in unprecedented times. I wonder how unprecedented these times really are. It's true that there's no one in the history of humanity who's encountered the specific combination of stressors that we're living through now. But it's not true that we're alone. Other's have walked into unprecedented moments. Others have had to mobilize their courage and take the next right step.

We are walking in their shadows.

Everyone talks about Abraham like he's got a monopoly on bravery. He walks into the unknown. He takes a chance on a Divine journey. He's God's yes-man, willing to do the worst in the name of the greatest God. But this week, I think there's a hero hiding in the shadows. And she's worth mentioning.

Rebecca is a young girl living in the shadow of tragedy. Her father has just passed away. And a stranger appears at the well, a stranger who is so touched by her kindness that he asks her

to come away with him, to meet and marry a man she's never met, a man who is scarred by trauma, to live out the rest of her days away from her family and everything she's ever known.

When she hops on that camel, she doesn't know where she's going. There's no federal marshal there to protect her, no mother to hold her hand. If things go South, she will have no where to turn. No way to get back home. Nothing to do.

She chooses to get on that camel. She places her hope in an unprecedented future. Rebecca has hope without knowing what to expect. Ruby chooses hope, chooses to walk through chaotic mobs through her head held high. Lucille has vision, has moral integrity, has courage, is determined to make sure her daughter and all the little girls that come after her will succeed. Their stories are our stories. They are telling us, "keep walking."

If you're afraid, keep walking.

If your path is blocked, keep walking.

If the sky is gray, keep walking.

If haters hate, keep walking.

If you get tired, keep walking.

No matter what, keep walking. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Junior once said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." That's true, but only if we keep walking.