

The Dominican Republic: Change the World

**Rabbinic Fellows Trip with
American Jewish World
Service**

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It was the Dominican Republic championships. The season of baseball in baseball crazed DR had come to down a best of 9 – yes, a 9 game – playoffs between the two powerhouse Santo Domingo teams – the Tigers and the Lions. On our only evening off during my trip with AJWS, five of us had managed to somehow get tickets.

Because both teams share Juan Marichal Stadium, the fans were divided into sides of blue and red at home plate. The rivalry was strong and we enjoyed empanadas in our seats and an intense game of béisbol.

It was 4-4 in the 6th inning. As I watched the collection of peripheral major leaguers, minor league prospects, and local standouts, I couldn't help but think of another baseball player: Ignacio Gabriel



Ignacio doesn't have a baseball card or a ranking as a prospect. He was a 17-year-old I had met a few days earlier. Ignacio was charming, confident, and friendly. The youngest of 4 brothers, his family was too poor to send him school and so he worked thanklessly in the sugar cane fields. But he had a passion. He loved baseball. And he was good. His right handed power arm caught scouts attention and at 14-years-old he was signed by the San Diego Padres to their Dominican training camps. This was a lifeline for his family. The meager signing bonus allowed him to provide food and clothing to his family. His fastball kept getting better and touched 94 MPH. Everything was unfolding like a dream for Ignacio. Except one thing. Ignacio didn't have his official identity card.



He went to the government offices repeatedly, even bringing representatives from Major League Baseball. He had all his proper papers. He had been born in the Dominican Republic and lived their his entire life. But they kept denying his request for an identity card. Without one, he couldn't get a passport and could never head to a minor league training camp. They never gave a reason or explained what was wrong with his paperwork. But everyone knew why the government was denying him proof of his nationality. His parents had emigrated from Haiti and he was a Dominican of Haitian descent.



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The Dominican Republic makes up the eastern part of the Island of Hispaniola. Discovered by Europeans and Christopher Columbus in 1492, it has some of the most interesting and oldest European history in the Western World. It has been colonized by Spain, dominated by Haiti, the western half of the island, and endured a 30-year dictatorship by Rafael Trujilo before his assassination. It has had a complicated democratic government in recent years including massive elections being held this year. The island is the most popular tourist destination in the Caribbean.



Distrust and disdain for Haiti can be found throughout the Dominican Republic. Resentment for their past histories and racism is often behind the antipathy. Most Haitians are dark skinned while Dominicans vary in skin tones from generations of intermingling between different groups, but culturally think of themselves as light skinned.



In 2013, the highest Dominican court issued a ruling that retroactively stripped the citizenship of anyone born on Dominican soil to non-Dominican parents between 1929 and 2010. The decision didn't impact other families with immigrant histories. Only those Dominicans with a Haitian parent were affected. After threats of mass deportations, the government passed several laws that allowed possibilities for Dominicans of Haitian descent to either apply for their citizenship papers or begin a process to be officially naturalized. On paper, the issue seemed to be solved for most Dominicans and the world and was generally forgotten.



Talk to the people who affected by these laws and you find it is far from forgotten. Last week I went to the Dominican Republic for a week as part of the American Jewish World Service Rabbinic Fellows program. You are familiar with AJWS. Whenever there is a devastating earthquake, as there was in Haiti in 2010, or typhoon or other national disaster, we recommend AJWS as the agency to make donations as they work directly with people at the heart of the incident. But AJWS is the only Jewish organization that works to end poverty and promote human rights in the developing world. Working in 19 countries from India to Kenya to Guatemala, they support local organizations fighting to make a difference in their own country.





Under the guidance of its President Ruth Messinger, a true human rights hero of our time, they change lives with funding, guidance, support, and innovation.



Along with 9 other rabbis from across the US, I spent the week meeting with some of these organizations. Often comprised of the poorest and most discriminated against, these organizations find ways to fight back and make their country better. Each group and person I met were an inspiration. Tonight, I want to tell a little about some of the real people with difficult stories.



Antonio is the director of REDH-JV. It is made up of Dominicans who have Haitian ancestry and find their rights continually denied. Despite the overwhelming odds against them at the bottom of the political ladder, they have worked directly with politicians, sued in local and national court, and begun to find opportunities for individuals and for the entire community. Antonio has not been able to get his identity card although he has been in the DR his whole life. He is a lawyer and has gone to court and governmental offices many times without success. His twin sister was named on a government list of those who should be able to get their ID. Antonio was not listed. His sister passed away many years ago. When he asked why he wasn't also listed, they told him his birth was illegitimate. Even though his twin sister's birth apparently was fine. Racism doesn't need logic.

Anna is a quiet woman with a Haitian parent. She has struggled to get her ID even though she was on the government list of those who should be able to get one. She went to the election board offices as part of a group of 17, all on the list. The Judge refused to acknowledge them, took Anna's birth certificate, ripped it up, and called in the police to arrest her. Just because there is official ways to resolve problems, doesn't mean there aren't those who refuse to follow them. When Kentucky Clerk Kim Davis refused to follow the law on Same Sex Marriage, she was jailed and the legal system stepped in to resolve it. There is nothing like that in the DR.



We know all too well what it is like to be at the negative end of oppression and discrimination. This week's Torah portion, Yitro, finishes the saga of our 430 years of slavery under the cruelty of Pharaoh. The situation in the DR reminds me of the Nuremberg Laws. Germany passed laws that stripped Jews of the citizenship and their rights. Some of those Jews had been heroes in World War I. But the bigotry and antisemitism of Hitler's regime obliterated any recognition of patriotism or common decency.



No one spoke up to help our people. We must not make the same mistake. 200,000 men, women, and children are being denied their rights because they have a Haitian parent even though they were born in the Dominican Republic. Thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent are being deported from the country. Many more live in utter poverty. Without IDs, they are unable to get jobs or go to school or get any government services. They live as illegal immigrants, even after living as legal citizens for decades. They live in fear of being discovered and deported to Haiti, a country they've never been to, don't speak the language, know no one, and, ironically, probably won't be recognized there as a citizen.



There are many sad stories of oppression, bigotry, and racism across the world. There are such stories here in America. We can't use the depth of the world's problems as an excuse not to care or help.

One reason I care about the DR is because I met Ignacio, the baseball prospect. He is not a statistic or a number. What Ignacio wants most is to build a house for his mom and help her escape from poverty. When the San Diego Padres dropped him because he couldn't get his papers, the Kansas City Royals saw his live arm on this now 17-year-old and signed him. He practices baseball 7 hours a day and does odd jobs or helps his mom. But he still can't get documentation. I asked him why doesn't he just go to Haiti. He could get papers there easier and then move to the US sending money back to the Dominican for his family. He told me he is a Dominican and one day he will succeed as a baseball player from the Dominican Republic.





America sadly has these stories. Racism and bigotry against Blacks, Latinos, Chinese, Japanese, the Irish, Italians, women, gays and lesbians, Jews, and on and on. Many of those discriminated against wanted nothing more than to be a full citizen of the US treated like all others. African Americans, Mexicans, and Muslims are facing potential governmental bias right now, among others. As a congregation, we must find ways to stand against such discrimination and make this country act in justice and equality.

We make a difference locally. Our Social Action Teams creates programs and opportunities to reach people directly and locally and help improve their lives with kindness that can last a lifetime.

We make a difference nationally. This weekend, our Confirmation Class continues its tradition of participating in the Religious Action Center's L'Taken weekend where they learn how to stand up for national issues and help change the direction of our country towards the holiness our tradition demands. For the people of the Dominican Republic, we can do something too. In the coming months, I'll be sharing information that we can use to contact our Congresswoman and our Senators. The United States of America is incredibly powerful in the DR and we have massive influence to encourage the government to follow through on their own laws that provide pathways to citizenships to people already born in the Dominican Republic. Our Congress can influence our State Department to stand up for justice.



While we were in the Dominican Republic, we met with the staff of US Ambassador to the Dominican Republic James “Wally” Brewster, Jr. We were disappointed the Ambassador couldn’t meet with us directly. But we met with his political Aide Stacey Maupin. She was welcoming and like many in such roles played her cards close. As a group, the Rabbinic Fellows have followed up on our meeting to keep encouraging change.



Going to the Dominican Republic let me meet people and hear their stories directly. But it also opened up sights that in person were carved in my memory.

On our second afternoon, we went to the batay, essentially the Haitian ghetto. As a people all too familiar with ghettos in our history, we saw the squalid conditions for Dominicans of Haitian Descent and Haitian migrant workers who reached the end of their rope in Santo Domingo. Then we visited the school. None of the local kids can attend public school as they don't have official papers.



So a make-shift set-up was created –The Naaisa School and its indefatigable director Juliana. It was a brightly colored collection of simple buildings. We could hear and feel the energy of kids coming from everywhere.



This week was a national holiday, but most of the kids had nowhere to go so they keep the school open all week as they did 7 days a week all year. There were 175 students in the school ranging from Kindergarten to 4th grade. And three teachers. All volunteer. They had no money for books. They tried to find money for food as many of the kids came to school hungry and returned to houses with no food



One of the school's graduates, Leni, spoke to us. She had learned jewelry-making through an AJWS sponsored organization, Mudha, and was able to scratch out the most meager of incomes.





The students of the school then shared a performance with us. 4 girls and 1 boy spoke what sounded to me like beautiful poetry in Spanish. I waited for the translation:

“I was born here, why are you kicking me out?”

“I am trapped like a bird in a cage, I cannot move?”

One little boy joined the group for a skit. He dropped to the floor in agony. “Mi madre esta muerta” “My mother is dead.” There were no words in response to this performance.



I am privileged to have gone on this journey with AJWS, my fellow rabbis, and the amazing staff. Their work is the true best of the Jewish heart – giving to others regardless of their background, but because they need support and care. AJWS doesn't impose outside agencies on a country, but helps local organizations expand. And they work in communities and on issues no one else wants to touch.



In a few weeks when you receive info on sharing a letter with our Congressional representatives, please take the time to do it. This is not the only issue we'll wrestle with, but it is one we face now, one we can make a difference.



At the beginning of the week, the Fellowship was asked to consider three questions.

Who am I?

Who is the other?

What are we doing together?



We know we are the Jewish community, which gives us the history and morality to recognize and respond to the pain of others.

The others I met were people who had lived their whole lives as citizens of the Dominican Republic. And unlike any other group with immigrant parents they were being stripped of the nationality and identity.

What are we doing together? We are working to change the world. Let's do it together.