

From O. J. to Charlotte in Black and White

I remember the moment well.

I was sitting in my car, waiting outside my office, my ear glued to the radio. The newscasters were about to announce the verdict of the O. J. Simpson double murder case. Would he be found guilty or not?

The evidence against him seemed overwhelming. But was he framed? Could the police be trusted? Yet if he was innocent, why did he run?

It seemed all of America was waiting with bated breath. What would the jury decide?

Many Americans stood gathered around TV monitors in public places, and as the words “not guilty” were pronounced something extraordinary happened. Many blacks were absolutely elated while many whites were absolutely shocked, as preserved in more than one iconic photo.

Why such disparate reactions?

Was it simply a matter of skin color, with blacks siding with O. J. and whites siding with the victims?

For some, it may have been that simple, but remember that O. J. was hugely popular in white America, and he had been married to a white American and was living the American dream. And how many blacks would want a cold-blooded, double-murderer, living in privileged white communities, to walk away free?

No, there was something deeper going on, and it had to do with perceptions about “the system,” in this case, police and the courts.

Blacks, generally speaking, tended to distrust the system; whites, generally speaking, tended to trust it.

Even today, more than 20 years after the O. J. verdict in June, 1995, "A full 83 percent of white Americans said that they are 'definitely' or 'probably' sure of Simpson's guilt. By contrast, 57 percent of black Americans agreed."

Significantly, 2015 marked the first time that polls indicated that a majority of black Americans also believed O. J. was guilty, in sharp contrast with a 1997 poll where 82 percent of whites and just 31 percent of blacks believed he was guilty.

But the numbers still remain quite disparate today, with the 2015 poll still showing a difference of 26 percent between the views of white and black Americans, and those deep difference in perceptions have surfaced time and again in the last few years (think Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Terrence Crutcher, and Keith Lamont Scott).

After George Zimmerman was acquitted in the killing of Trayvon Martin, I wrote an article titled, "The George Zimmerman Trial in Black and White," where I laid out the varied racial perspectives on the trial, arguing passionately for each position and doing my best to expose each side to the perspective of the other side.

Now, this tragic scenario is playing out again with the Charlotte shooting of Keith Lamont Scott.

Speaking again in broadly general terms (and I apologize for the obvious over-generalizations), white Americans are grieved over the shooting but see it as justifiable.

After all, the man had a gun, he refused to obey numerous orders by the police officer (hey, he didn't even listen to his wife saying, "Don't do it!"), and he was potentially threatening the life of others. He also had a police

record—come on, he previously assaulted someone with a deadly weapon—and his fingerprints, blood and DNA were found on the gun.

And there's more: The officer who shot him is black and the local police chief is black, and the police chief insists that there are eyewitnesses, along with video evidence, confirming that the officer acted properly.

Black Americans are not just grieved over the shooting, they are outraged.

Here was a man sitting peacefully in his car, waiting for his son to come home from school as he did every day, reading a book (the Quran). He posed no threat to anyone, nor did he own a gun or regularly carry a gun.

And for goodness sake, the man had been in a motorcycle accident and had a traumatic brain injury (TBI), making it difficult for him to respond to the police properly. His own wife was shouting, "He doesn't have a gun!" and "He has a TBI!"

As for the gun, the police planted it at the scene (remember the white cop in South Carolina who was charged with murder and who allegedly altered the crime scene to implicate the black man he shot in the back?), and there are eyewitnesses who confirm that it was a white officer who shot Mr. Scott.

White Americans then say, "You've got to be kidding me! You're sticking in your head in the sand. And just look at these lawless rioters and looters. No wonder the police are so quick to shoot."

Black Americans say, "What will it take for you to accept that we are not treated equally? And while these looters do not represent our community, they're expressing a deep frustration we've felt for decades."

And on and it goes, with no end in sight.

A few days ago, my wife Nancy said to me, "How would we feel if, as whites, we were the small minority, brought over on slave ships and sold as slaves, then oppressed by black society for generations, with anti-white prejudice still alive and well in many parts of the society?"

Obviously, we've thought about these things before, but it's almost impossible for us to know how we'd feel since this was not our background and experience (although as Jews, we have had more than our share of suffering in history through the centuries).

At the same time, the perception of the oppressed can also be skewed, especially when agitators play into a perpetual victim mentality that continues to enslave rather than empower.

What, then, is the solution?

At the risk of repeating points I've made in previous articles, here are four simple things we must do.

First, we must determine not to react in a fleshly, emotional, even irrational way, recognizing that carnal anger does not produce positive results. Pointing fingers, insulting others and, worse still, breaking the law, does far more harm than good.

Second, we must talk face to face as much as possible with other fair-minded people across the racial divide, asking them to share their perspectives before allowing us to share ours.

Third, we must ask God to reveal blind spots we might have along with blind spots our friends and colleagues might have.

Fourth, we must commit to following the truth wherever it leads—to pursuing justice, regardless of the consequences and implications—which requires courage and integrity and humility.

Can we do this together?

Do we really have a choice?