



# AL SHARPTON TALKS MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HIS PLACE AT THE CENTER OF CIVIL RIGHTS

By Allison Kugel



For many Black Americans, he is next to a Messiah. For many non Black Americans, he is thought to be an agitator, riling up already uncomfortable societal quagmires that are better left swept under the rug. Media image aside, Reverend Al Sharpton is neither of these things. The boy raised by a single mother in working class Queens, New York, developed a passion for civil rights activism as a pre-teen. He began marching alongside **Reverend Jesse Jackson** and other prominent civil rights activists at the tender age of thirteen, seeking to progress the legacy of **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**'s message of civil disobedience and taking the high road to equal rights under the law for Black Americans.

As the years progressed, though the American civil rights movement has remained something of a moving target, much of the fight has landed at Reverend Al Sharpton's doorstep. Families of victims of police brutality, fatal racial discrimination and other hate crimes come to him in their quest to gain the media attention they need to enact criminal justice and legislative reform on behalf of their loved ones. The powerless and voiceless look to Reverend Sharpton to get their voices heard. As Sharpton, himself, put it to me during our conversation, **"People have called me an ambulance chaser, but we are the ambulance."**

He is referring to victims' families who have been helped by Sharpton's National Action Network (NAN), providing everything from the media attention these families need to pressure prosecutors to take action towards justice, to gaining the attention of congress for policy reform, as well as emotional and financial support in some instances. Now, with his new book, *Rise Up: Confronting A Country At The Crossroads*, Reverend Al Sharpton outlines his unrelenting position on the weightiest political and societal issues of our time, recounts some hard lessons learned, and offers an inside glimpse into the mentors who shaped the man we see today. Most importantly, Reverend Sharpton outlines his plan for an America at the crossroads.

A close-up portrait of Reverend Al Sharpton. He is an older Black man with a grey mustache and goatee, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His hand is resting under his chin. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue shirt and a patterned tie. The background is a plain, light color.

REVEREND AL SHARPTON

# RISE UP

CONFRONTING  
A COUNTRY AT THE  
CROSSROADS

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

**Alison Kugel:** In light of recent news in the **Breonna Taylor** case (no criminal charges were filed in her death), what was your first reaction when you heard that decision?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** It was alarming, but not surprising. I didn't have confidence in this investigation, because of the obvious policies of the prosecutor. The prosecutor guides the grand jury and there is nobody in there besides the prosecutor. This prosecutor is a protégé of Mitch McConnell. I did not think that he was going to do anything. I did feel that the indictment of the other officer, [Brett] Hankison, for the endangerment of everybody but Breonna was just as offensive. What they are saying is that he was reckless in who he was shooting at and putting others at risk. What about who they shot, and her being at risk? It is one of the reasons why we do what we do. In saying there needs to be new laws. We just had a big march with tens of thousands of us, three weeks ago.

Among two of the things we wanted are **The George Floyd Policing and Justice Act** that sat in the House, but the Senate hasn't taken it up. It would strengthen the laws that would have eliminated the no knock laws and put this whole thing in a different perspective.

That's one of the things I talk about that in this new book.

**Allison Kugel:** Many people believe that you just show up wherever the action and media attention is. It's important for people to know that you and your **National Action Network (NAN)** are the ones who work to bring national attention to these cases in the first place. For example, it was your organization, NAN, that brought national attention to Trayvon Martin's murder and to George Floyd's murder. Without your hard work, the world wouldn't know the names **Trayvon Martin** or **George Floyd**. Why isn't this common knowledge?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** A lot of the media just doesn't say it. **Ben Crump** (Attorney for the Floyd family) and the families have said it. In fact, Breonna Taylor's mother's first interview was on my show (MSNBC's "PoliticsNation"). They couldn't get a national show before my show. **Sybrina Fulton** (Trayvon Martin's mother) wrote about it her book on Trayvon. Ben Crump brought them to New York to ask me to blow up Trayvon [in the media]. Trayvon had been buried for 2 weeks. I didn't even know about Trayvon until they came and met with me in my office. We made it an issue and called the first rally and had about 10,000 people out there. It ended up being the day my mother died, and I went ahead with the rally anyway. I said in the eulogy to George Floyd that people call me to blow things up, and I have an infrastructure with NAN where we support the family, we help them get legal advice and media advice, and we stay with them. Sometimes people can't cover their expenses if they need to do a rally. Some of them need to pay their rent, and NAN helps with that.

They call us because they know we'll come.

**Allison Kugel:** Who is your heir apparent once you reach a certain age and you are no longer able to do this work?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** That would come up through the ranks of NAN (Sharpton's National Action Network). We have a lot of young people in our youth and college division, and some of them have a lot of potential. It is not up to me to choose who it will be, but I think it will come up from the ranks of the movement. That is why I built an organization. I could have just resigned from NAN several years ago, not worried about raising five to ten million dollars a year, and just done radio and TV and been a personality. I built a structure because I wanted to go way beyond my viability. I came out of that kind of structure, but nobody anointed me. The point person before me was Reverend Jesse Jackson who was one of my mentors, but he didn't choose me. Cream rises to the top. You're going to take a lot of scrutiny. You're going to take a lot of attacks. I've been stabbed and done time in jail for marching. There is a downside to this, and not everybody is built for that.

**Allison Kugel:** What you are saying is actually a great life lesson. Nobody anoints you. Nobody taps you on the head and says, "You are the chosen one." It has to come from within, and a person takes it upon themselves to take the ball and run with it. That applies to anything in life.

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** Absolutely, and you will only do it if it comes from inside. If I sat down and asked somebody if they would go through what I went through... I've done 90 days in jail at one time. Who would apply for that? But if it is in you, you take it as it comes because your commitment and your beliefs are bigger than whatever it is you are going to face. But this is not a career move. I started to write when I was 12, I started preaching before that, and I became youth director under Jesse and Reverend William Jones when I was 13. When I was 13 years old, I didn't sit down and say, "If I do this, one day I'll have a show on MSNBC." When I started, there was no MSNBC. There was no radio show syndication owned by blacks. You do things out of commitment and things result from that, but your critics will act like you just figured out this will make you famous.

How would I know at 13 years old where this was going to go?



Rev. Al Sharpton "boy preacher" circa 1966. Photo courtesy of Swann Auction Galleries.

**Allison Kugel:** After reading your book cover to cover I went to sleep and woke up the next morning with this thought: We are supposed to be the smartest, most sophisticated species on the planet. However, we have trillions of dollars in circulation on this planet, and millions of people are broke. We have more than enough food, to the point that we throw out ridiculous amounts of food every day, and millions of people are starving. So, we can't be that smart.

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** I think you should be an activist. You are absolutely right. It's a matter of will and a matter of using the intelligence we claim to have to distribute things more wisely, and to make people the priority rather than greed and ego. It's a decision that we throw out food and not feed everybody. There is enough food for everybody. It is a decision to allow the water and the air to be polluted for people's profit. We can clean up the air and the water. That is part of why I'm saying we need to Rise Up (the title of Sharpton's new book, out now), and this is not a book that just deals with blacks. I deal with climate change. I deal with LGBTQ rights. I'm saying, across the board, we could be better than this, but we are not rising up and demanding these things.

**Allison Kugel:** In your book you illustrate a parallel between The Great Depression and The New Deal put in place by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and our current economic crisis due to COVID 19 and the potential solution of a Green New Deal.

Have you had the chance to speak with **Kamala Harris** or **Joe Biden** about this?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** During the [primary] campaign, yes. There was the meeting when Kamala came to Harlem and went with me to Sylvia's soul food restaurant. I've talked to them separately. I've not talked to them at length since they were nominated. Obviously, we've talked on the phone, but this is something that I'm pushing out and I'm encouraging them to do. With COVID 19 this country is going to go through a tremendous economic challenge. We need a Marshall Plan and government involvement to bring the country back.

If we don't have that kind of engagement, we are going to have a very difficult 2021 and 2022.

**Allison Kugel:** How do you see a Green New Deal rolling out despite the strong lobby for oil? How can a new administration circumvent that?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** Rise up and vote in this election and put in office people that will not be in any way swayed by the lobbyists. We have to change the lawmakers. Lobbyists can only go as far as who they can influence. You currently have people in the Senate and the Congress that they can influence. They have to have that majority commit to it; the same way Roosevelt did with The New Deal. That is why I wanted this book out before the upcoming election, to lay all of this out.

**Allison Kugel:** With the worldwide protests that erupted after the murder of George Floyd, what do you ultimately see resulting from all the protesting?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** The legislation is one, as I said, but the overall result should be how we as a culture redefine policing and move past police being above the law while questioning the actions of some police is thought to be anti-police. I think legislation can enforce this, or we need a cultural shift. One of the reasons the Floyd case caught on the way it did is that it happened in the middle of a pandemic and everyone was in lockdown. There were no sports, so people were watching the news to see what was happening with the lockdown. They kept seeing this footage over and over again, and they couldn't turn to sports as a distraction. There was no distraction with George Floyd, and I think that caused an eruption. How could somebody press their weight with their knee on someone's neck for more than eight minutes unless there was some venom there?



Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) and Rev. Al Sharpton exit after having lunch at Sylvia's Restaurant in Harlem, February 21, 2019 in New York City.

**Allison Kugel:** I believe everything happens for a reason. I love how you said that God chooses the most unlikely people to make the biggest impact on the world. George Floyd's story and his likeness will be passed down for generations to come. Has the Floyd family grasped the enormity of that?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** Yes, we talk about it all the time. His brother, Philonise, who does a lot of speaking for the family, we talk almost every day. We talked last night, and I think they have begun to understand the impact. Their immediate reaction was they didn't understand it, because they were suddenly thrust into something [public] and they were also mourning. As time has gone on and they see people responding to George and his image, they understand that maybe God used him as an instrument. I told them God absolutely used him as an instrument. Nothing but God could have brought it to this level, and you have to be at peace with that and also set your responsibility in that.

**Allison Kugel:** I want to talk to you about Defund the Police. I read where you are not in favor of it, and I'm definitely not for it. Rather than defund the police, I am of the mind that some funds should be reallocated towards programs for compassion, empathy, tolerance, psychological competency, and things like that. What are your thoughts?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** I think that we should redistribute how we do the resources like dealing with some of the things you outlined. A month after we did the eulogies for George Floyd, I did a eulogy for a 17-year-old kid killed by a stray bullet in the Bronx, and a eulogy for a one year old baby that was killed by a straight bullet in Brooklyn. How can we say we don't need policing when our communities are disproportionately victims of crime? We are the only community that has reasonable fear of cops and robbers. I think we need to reevaluate how we deal with the funds for police. We must have police in presence because right now we are inundating our communities with guns and drugs, and that is reality. Ironically though, I think what people don't understand, Allison, is the one who has defunded the police is Trump. By Trump ineffectively handling COVID 19, most of these cities are going to be in deficit and will be laying off police. That is a bigger threat than people stating it at rallies. They have run out of funds. They are laying off teachers and policeman in some cities.

**Allison Kugel:** Good point. And whether you love Trump or hate him, every American should be aware that an important part of our democracy is a free press, as well as our postal service. When you have somebody in the highest office in the land who essentially gaslights the American public and says, *"You can't trust the media, you can't trust the medical experts; only believe Me,"* that is very dangerous rhetoric and undermines our democracy. Why do you think so many Trump supporters aren't seeing that?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** It baffles me on one level, and on another level, I think because the country is so divided, and they have been divided by the media. The media has convinced people that everybody but FOX [News] and a few radio talk show guys are buffaloing you or fooling you. They set a climate where a guy like Trump, who really is representing himself almost as an autocrat, can rise up and take advantage of that. He can say, *"Don't believe them, believe me. I'm one of you."* There is nobody more not one of them than Trump, with the glitzy billionaire lifestyle he lives. Whether he is a real billionaire or not, we don't know. But he's been able to sell that to people who are suffering through existence issues that are lower-middle class or poor, like I grew up. It's appealing to them that they are doing this to me, and he has identified "they" as the liberal media. He gives everybody a blame game. In the interim, he does policies that don't help them, but that they can feel that it is not his fault, instead it's *their* fault.

**Allison Kugel:** Throwing it back to the 2016 presidential election, do you think **Hillary Clinton** was a strong and viable candidate?



Davell Gardner Sr., the father of Davell Gardner Jr. is comforted by Reverend Al Sharpton during the funeral service of 1-year-old Davell Gardner Jr. at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Bedford-Stuyvesant July 27, 2020 in New York City.

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** I think she was a strong and viable candidate, but she did not run a strong and viable campaign. They did not engage the ground enough. To lose Michigan by 12,000 votes, I know three churches that could have given her that. They never went into Detroit. They never really went into Milwaukee. I think there was almost this feeling of, "We got this. Nobody is going to vote for Trump." She certainly had the credentials. I think she had the vision, and I think she is a decent person. I knew her since she was First Lady, but I think her campaign was too up in the air, too high ground. They didn't get on the ground, and that is where the voters were. It left an opening for Trump to do it. I think that Biden has not run that campaign so far.

**Allison Kugel:** Meaning he *has* been on the ground?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** He *has* been on the ground, and he has his infrastructure on the ground.

**Allison Kugel:** As a Jewish American, this next question is more personal. There is a faction of the Black American movement that has become antisemitic as of late. It's confounding to me based on our shared history and a lot of our shared activism. How can we clear up some of these misconceptions?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** We need to stand and walk together and go back to the history. When I was a kid, I will never forget. Reverend Jackson brought me to the Jewish Theological Seminary, and I met **Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel** who marched with Dr. King. Rabbi Heschel gave me a collection of his books and I still have some, like *God and Man*, and some others. There are people like Heschel, who were part of the backbone of the Civil Rights Movement. Tell a lot of people today that when we talk about voting rights, **Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner**, were three Jews who died to get us the right to vote. I don't think enough of us talk about that in the Black community. And yes, we may have had our disagreements, but the history of it is not put out enough, and we have to deliberately deal with the misnomer that we have not come together and suffered together. I remember when 9/11 happened. I went to **Mort Zuckerman**, who was then the head of the Conference of Jewish Organizations, and I said I want to go to Israel and identify with the fact that they live under this kind of terrorism all the time, and we just went through it in New York. [Former Israeli President] **Shimon Peres** invited me as his guest to Israel and I went and met with him. He asked me to take that message to **Yasser Arafat**. He set up a meeting with [Yasser] Arafat [late Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization], and I went and worked with them.

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** There are people on both sides that don't want to let certain things go, but we have to keep standing up and represent the facts of history. We've suffered together, we've fought together, and at this time we cannot afford to be separate. We are fighting the same enemy. Most people that are racist are also antisemitic, and those who are antisemitic are mostly racist. We are connected, and we need to stop acting like we are not.

**Allison Kugel:** I like that. A big part of your organization, the National Action Network, is Criminal Justice Reform. Recently **Kim Kardashian** worked with President Trump to have the life sentence of **Alice Marie Johnson**, a nonviolent offender, commuted. Would you ever be open to following suit and working with this current administration on Criminal Justice Reform?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** I don't trust Trump. I did support the [Emergency Community Supervision Act of 2020] bill that **Corey Booker** and **Hakeem Jeffries** came to me with. They said, "Even though we are working with Jared Kushner, would you support this bill?" **Van Jones** called me, and he was working very closely with **Jared Kushner**. I said, "I'm not going to do photo ops with them, but I support the bill." I went on my show and endorsed the bill. I think you have to put principle over personality, but I don't want a photo opp with this president. He called me after he won and invited me to Mar-a-Lago, and I wouldn't go because I believe he is just a cynical manipulator. Even bad people can sometimes deliver good results, and I didn't want to get in the way of the results. I wanted to support it even though I do not trust him. Even a broken clock is right twice a day.



Donald Trump and Rev. Al Sharpton during the Grand Opening of Megu Midtown at Trump World Towers April 19, 2006 in New York City.

**Allison Kugel:** (Laugh) Lastly, there has been a lot of rioting and looting mixed in with peaceful protesting. Your organization's famous slogan is, "No Justice, No Peace." Do you want to clear up, for people, what you mean by that?

**Reverend Al Sharpton:** It means the only way we are going to have real peace, where we can live together as a society that respects each other, is to have justice. I don't mean 'no peace' in the sense of violence. I am absolutely, unequivocally against violence. I have denounced it everywhere and will continue to. As far as the two cops shot in Louisville, Kentucky: I think it is morally wrong. You cannot become like the people you are fighting. If you become like that, if you have the same values and the same moral code, they have already defeated you. At the same time, I think there's a difference between peace and quiet. Quiet means just shut up and suffer. Peace means let's strive to work together even if we've got to march and make noise together to get an equal society for everybody. That is what I mean by "**No Justice, No Peace.**"



**Rise Up: Confronting A Country At The Crossroads.**  
the latest book by **Reverend Al Sharpton**, is now  
available worldwide.

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Follow her on Instagram @theallisonkugel and at  
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