

Kol Nidre 5780

Racism in America

Rabbi Deborah A. Hirsch

*Yom Kippur* is a day of blunt and brutal honesty...of truth telling...to ourselves and to God. Standing in front of you tonight, I share with you that my colleagues and I wrestled this year, more than in years' past, in preparing High Holy Days Sermons--balancing being a voice of social conscience with congregants' capacity for spiritual overload. One need only read the daily headlines of mass shootings, climate change catastrophes, the opioid crisis, child abuse at the border, xenophobia--to know we are living in very, very broken and hard times. Our humanity too often is eclipsed by violence and vitriol. Civility borders on extinction.

Tomorrow afternoon we shall read the story of Jonah--the reluctant prophet. The narrative unfolds, hinging on the tension between two words and images : *Kum* and *Yarad*. God commands Jonah--*Kum*--Rise up and *Yarad* -go down to the city of Nineveh and prophesy so that they repent and avoid God's wrath. Jonah, *kam*--'Got up' but fled from God's call and he *yarad*--went down into Leviathan's belly, and the great fish hurled Jonah up onto the land, and he went down and prophesied to the people of Nineveh and they repented. For us, this day, too, is about descending into our inner hearts...it's about going down into the depths of our souls to perform *Cheshbon Hanefesh*—accounting of our souls, even as God takes note of our merits, we must dive deep into our own souls--our collective soul as well, and be honest about our shortcomings. And, we pray—*nakum*-- we shall rise up from our seats as the sun sets tomorrow, inscribed for another year of life. Like Jonah, we too often attempt to flee responsibility. It's about hearing the urgent call for justice and rising to our best selves...as individuals and as Americans and not descending into the pit of apathy and complacency.

On *Rosh Hashanah* I spoke on the alarming wave of White Supremacy fanning across Europe. Today, I wish to address racism in America, which differs from the antisemitism rampant in Europe. Unlike Europe, the United States' greatness rests on the backs of its immigrant populations . To quote my favorite Broadway show...we and our families, all come from away. AND, originally, America only embraced immigrants of European descent . "In March 1790 Congress passed the first law about who should be granted U.S. citizenship. Let's face it--everyone, except Native Americans, was an immigrant. The Naturalization Act of 1790 allowed any free *white* person of 'good character' who had been living in the United States for two years or longer, to apply for citizenship." Yes, racism as much as freedom, is embedded in both our country's past and present. Clearly, our country's racial bias existed long before the recent rise of the Alt-Right and its rhetoric. White privilege is part of our country's DNA. So where do Jews fit into this scenario--surely we were granted full rights of citizenship? The early 19th Century waves of American immigration came from Western Europe--Italy, Germany, England, France, Italy--people who eventually would blend into America's melting pot. Jews emigrating from those countries passed for white Europeans. Only, with mass immigration from Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, did immigration restrictions get imposed on the Eastern Europe's 'subhuman' population, including many of our subhuman Russian Jewish ancestors.

During the height of antisemitism in the 1930s, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster created Superman--a hero who came from the away place of Krypton--whose Krypton name was *Kol El-*

-Hebrew for voice of God. Superman combated the forces of evil in the world. Many here can recall Superman's catch-phrase: Truth, justice and the American way. Today, many of us are shaking our heads trying to find truth, uphold justice and define the American way. White Supremacists use racist language and dehumanize those who are not white, Christian Americans. White Supremacy is inextricably linked to racism and let us be clear, antisemitism is a form of racism, and for those who profess a white supremacy ideology, caucasian Jews are not white, we are other. We are victims of the same white supremacist rhetoric hurled at Muslims, Latinos Blacks and Asians. In the 1950s, because of a shared racist victimization, Blacks and Jews were allies in fighting American bigotry. "A 1938 poll found that 60% of the American public held Jews in low esteem, calling them greedy, dishonest and pushy. A 1939 Roper poll for Fortune Magazine found that only 39% of Americans saw Jews as worthy of being treated like other people, 53 percent said, "Jews are different and should be restricted." (p. 55 Semitism).

Eric Ward, executive director of Western States Center, provides this lens for understanding the Alt Right's perception of Jews. (Tikkun Magazine interview). "The truth is that the Jewish community has never been white, it has only been allowed temporary access to privileges." The provisional access has led to modern antisemitism in Europe, Jews as scapegoats of the ruling class..the buffer between haves and have nots." And in America, how do white nationalists explain their defeats...their inability to totally oppress people of color? Ward posits, "You can't say those who were inferior bested you, there must be another answer, and an adaptation of modern European antisemitism provides the explanation. In short, white supremacists adopted the philosophy that a secret Jewish cabal must have been behind the Civil Rights movement. This was the only way black folks could have won." They argue Jewish support for immigration, reproductive rights and gender I.D., allows Jews to enslave whites. Ward cautions, "White nationalism seeks the removal of people of color altogether. Antisemitism becomes the fuel for the white nationalist engine."

Despite the hovering dark shadow of white supremacy today, America, never has mirrored Nazi Germany's state sponsored antisemitism--a critical distinction between Hitler's Germany and the U.S. today. Currently, we are experiencing White Nationalists who have flown under the radar for decades, who now have emerged in full force and have been emboldened in recent years, by political leaders, to act on their hate. William Regnery II, founder of the white supremacist National Policy Institute, stated, "White Nationalism 'went from being conversation you could hold in a bathroom, to the front parlor.'" (((Semitism))) p. 124) And may our Supreme Court uphold non-state sponsored hate, and mete out justice regarding Dallas judge, Vickers Cunningham, who publicly denigrated a Jewish defendant, Randy Haprin with the racial slurs of God "D"Jew and a F-Expletive Jew and is known to be a racist bigot.

Historically, African Americans did not receive the same government protection from white violence, as did Jews. In fact, Blacks were subjected to state and local laws that encouraged and enforced discrimination and persecution. And, despite our country's white privileged beginnings, America, has had a history of *yarad v'kum*--diving deep into prejudice and making strides to lift up people of color and people at risk. Although the Civil Right Act was passed 55 years ago, people of color perpetually have faced an uphill battle toward acceptance and have been the targets of discrimination, racial profiling, incarceration and violence. Coretta Scott King wrote, "Freedom is never really won, you earn it and win it in every generation."

Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy* and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, tells the story of his first meeting with Rosa Parks. She turned to him sweetly and said, "Now Bryan,

tell me who you are and what you're doing. Yes, ma'am...well I have a law project called the Equal Justice Initiative, and we're trying to help people on death row." He went on to detail all of EJI's efforts. Ms. Parks leaned back and smiled and said, "ooooooh honey, all that's going to make you tired, tired, tired. They all laughed, and then Ms Johnnie Carr, the indomitable force behind the Carr vs. Montgomery Board of Education case, leaned forward and said, "That's why you have to be brave, brave, brave."

According to a PEW, April 2019 report, "Although blacks represent 12% of the U.S. adult population, they comprise 33% of the sentenced prison populations." In 2017 "there were 1549 black prisoners for every 100,000 black adults--nearly six times the imprisonment rate for whites." Thousands have been incarcerated for life without parole, for non-violent crimes including drug-related conviction--more than two-thirds are African-Americans.(Democracy Now, Nov. 15, 2013). It boggles my mind, that Timothy Jackson, who stole a \$159 jacket is serving life without parole and Amber Guyger, who killed Bothan Jean in his apartment in Houston was sentenced to 10 years, with the possibility of parole after serving just 5 years.

The Alt-right today feeds on the injustice to people of color, rallying white Americans to rid our country of non-white impurities. So many of the recent gun rampages and church burnings, targeted people of color--the perpetrators all linked to Alt-Right communities. According to US News and World Report, in July of this year, (July19, 2019), 'racism was the most searched term on its online dictionary during one of the president's campaign rallies. Let me clear, the rhetoric and vocabulary used by our president and other politicians, intentionally or not, feeds the white nationalist racist frenzy. Today, Muslims and Latinos, many fleeing persecution, and the terrorism that terrorizes us, have 'treat me other' targets on their backs, like the yellow stars Jews wore throughout history. And, The United States has the highest reported cases of antisemitic violence...more than that of the UK, France or Germany.

As most here know, last May, some Village Temple members travelled with me to Alabama to learn about the early years of the Civil Rights Movement--the historic & holy places of Montgomery, Selma and Birmingham: The street corner where a young Rosa Parks boarded a bus and refused to give up her seat...the Pettus Bridge in Selma, site of the Bloody Sunday beatings, Kelly Ingram Park, where police turned water hoses on protestors and unleashed attack dogs on Civil Rights advocates and the 16th Street Baptist Church where three young black girls were blown-up. And let us not forget, early Civil Rights Movement protestors adhered to Dr. King's core principle of non-violent protest.

For me, and I believe for other participants, no place was more moving than the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice that opened in April 2018. The Legacy Museum traces the Civil Rights struggles wrought with prejudice, assassination, mob lynchings and hate. As I walked out of the museum's last room, an elderly African-American man was sitting on a bench just holding his head in his hands. At that moment, I realized that The Legacy Museum is to the African American Community is what Yad Vashem is for the Jews.

And The National Memorial for Peace and Justice--constructed to burn into one's mind the image of pillars suspended, like limp bodies, from a ceiling, with the names of towns and those lynched in those towns inscribed on each pillar--similar to the Valley of Destroyed Communities I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah. It seemed endless...800 pillars...each conjuring the image of a person hanging, lifeless, in mid-air-a haunting sight.

In today's world one need not attend a rally to be inspired to racial violence. Today, rabid hatred is fueled by, and lives on the internet--in chat rooms no one in this room would dare

enter. The Dark Web provides anonymity for its users. Its content is what no parent in this sanctuary would want their child to watch: pornography, violence, and yes, racism. (White Supremacists Loners Become Lone Wolf Mass Murderers on the Dark Web, Andy Sheehan, August 5, 2019--CBS Pittsburgh). TOR, is a name that sounds like it should be the evil force in a Superman comic book. TOR allows for anonymity online, defending users against tracking surveillance or censorship. 4 Chan and 8 Chan are white supremacist groups lurking on the dark web, now that mainstream carriers like Facebook, Go Daddy have banned them. Andrew Anglin, editor of the Daily Stormer, a website modeled after Nazi Germany's Der Strumer newspaper, is a Dark Web sanctuary for neo-Nazis and white supremacists. Anglin posted, "Whites are undergoing extermination, via mass immigration into White countries which was enabled by a corrosive, libel ideology of White self-hatred, and the Jews are at the center of this agenda...It is now fully documented that Jews are behind mass immigration, feminism, the news media and Hollywood, pornography, the global banking system, global communism, the homosexual political agenda, the wars in the Middle East and virtually everything else the alt-Right is opposed to." John Earnest, a devotee of Anglin, is the alleged gunman in the Poway Chabad Synagogue attack. He never met Robert Bowers, the alleged gunman in the Tree of Life massacre...at least not in person. But, "In April, 19 year old John Earnest made 10 references to Bowers and invaders into our country, before attacking the synagogue in Poway." For white supremacists...for white supremacist want-a-bes who are 14 or 16 or 18, the Dark Web provides a safe place for them to dabble in hate and be inspired to racial violence. Another popular website is 1488: the fourteen represents the 14 words of the Mein Kampf creed I referenced on Rosh Hashanah: *We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.* And the 88 references a different 88 word paragraph in Mein Kampf calling for the reproduction of the white race and purity of blood. And 88 represents the 8th letter of the alphabet doubled--HH for Heil Hitler. For those trolling the dark web, it does not matter the intention behind politicians' statements, including those of President Trump, the Dark Web captures politician's single words--like invaders, disloyal, rapists, murders, immigrants, Jews, cabal, wealth--to ignite, like a match in a parched forest, a raging blaze of racist hate --words lifted in or out of context provide the fuel for the Alt-Right to galvanize an army of violence.

Last week, the Forward interviewed 65 rabbis to determine what were common High Holy Day Sermon themes. No surprise--antisemitism was the number one sermon topic for 5780. And we can't address antisemitism without understanding its link to racism. The Jewish community must never sever its role in championing Civil Rights. We cannot forget that most Jews live in the twilight world of white privilege and white nationalist hate. We have to rekindle the dim flame of *tikkun*--of repair, that has been flickering. Indeed it is easy to become tired, tired, tired, and we have to be brave, brave, brave. Abraham Lincoln once said, "To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men." I have spoken with Nelly Szlachetr, our social action chair, regarding voter registration for the 2020 elections. Although I will not be here next year, I will work with Nelly to identify groups organizing to register voters in states where racial bias is very real. I hope that members of our congregation will volunteer to journey, like the Freedom Riders of the 1960s, to uphold voting rights for all Americans.

Racism and prejudice must be defeated in each generation. As much as German Students visit Hitler's Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, so too, do students trek down to Alabama to learn, to realize the sins of the fathers and avow not to repeat them. The Etgar Civil Rights Journey trip adults participated in this past May, will be repeated for our youth in the months ahead. *V'shinantam L'vanecha*--we must teach our children...they too, must experience history.

In Deuteronomy, chapter 20, nine chapters before tomorrow's Torah portion in which we Moses pleads with the Israelites to choose life, Moses tells the new generation on the precipice of entering the promised land, the story of their parents' generation that had died off. He said in God's name, "I told your parents, You are come into the hill country of the Amorites...Behold *Adonai* your God has set the land before you, *Kum*--go up and take possession." The Promised Land was in the older generation's grasp and it slithered through their fingers. For immediately following Moses' charge, Israel hearkened to the negative report of the spies and are condemned by God to wander for 40 years in the wilderness.

Biblical scholar Nechama Leibowitz, commenting on the importance of this verse for the new generation wrote, "The new generation only had to learn the lesson of history as they stood on the threshold of the land... if they were obedient to the lesson learned, they would occupy the Land and reap the fruits thereof."

We too must learn from history. Like the Israelites on the edge of freedom, we need not have been present during the fight for Civil Rights through the decades, to champion its cause today. We may not have been targets of bigotry to know its sting. We must remember the lessons of past generations. Indeed there have been moments when we have *yaradnu*...plummeted into waters where our humanity drowned. Bryan Stevenson, like a *Shofar*, beckons us to *nakum*, to rise up. He wrote, "We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others." *Nakum*--let us rise up, and like Jonah, may hear *Kol El*—God's voice, and may we become prophets of change and mercy. *Keyn Yehi Ratzon*.