

**Racism 2020**  
**Yom Kippur 5781**  
**Congregation B'nai Jacob**  
**Rabbi Rona Shapiro**

Five years ago on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke from this bima about racism. Some of you cheered; some, perhaps more of you, dismissed my words.

And yet with the gruesome murder of George Floyd this spring and the ensuing protests in almost every city and small town in America, and across the world, we find ourselves here again. Only the names have changed: George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Aubrey, Rayshard Brooks. In the last five years, five black Americans have been shot and killed by police every single week.

On one level, nothing has changed. I could give the exact same sermon I gave five years ago. It is still, sadly, equally and painfully relevant.

On another level, a lot has changed. Charlottesville happened. We have a White House that seeks to divide Americans, and sow rather than quell violence. A pandemic happened ripping off the veneer, exposing racial and economic inequities we have long nurtured but mostly looked away from. George Floyd was viciously murdered while America watched. And, whereas five years ago, protestors were mainly Black and young, today, Americans of all ages, colors, and political affiliations from all across this great land have taken to the streets.

To answer what has changed, I want to begin with this year's Big Read, Ta Nehesi Coates' incredible book, "Between the World and Me." I hope that many of you have read it and had a chance to discuss it in one of the book groups held on Rosh Hashanah. Coates' writing is lyrical and elegant; reading the book, one feels his warmth, his big-hearted love for his son, for his fellow Americans, for this much-flawed nation. Five years ago, when I read the book, I was struck by his anger — in fact, the book often felt so angry it was difficult for me to read. Reading it this time felt different — things that Coates said that shocked and appalled me then, seemed to me self-evident truths today.

Coates argues that America was built on the backs of black people, "through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor and land; through the flaying of backs, the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents, the destruction of families; the rape of mothers, the sale of children." When I first read these words, I thought they were too extreme. Yes, of course, slavery is a stain on American history but American history is more complex than that, and America was built on many things, some of them noble and good.

Today, I am more ready to reckon with the truth of his statement. In school we learned that Lincoln freed the slaves, that after Reconstruction, there was a misguided but geographically and temporarily limited period of Jim Crow, rectified by the Civil Rights Act and now made whole, with some notable exceptions of individuals and institutions

still stuck in old racist ways. We conveniently forget that the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act were written into law to secure rights that Black people had in fact obtained on paper a hundred years earlier but had then been systematically denied. We ignore the fact that 400,000 enslaved Africans, sold into America, transformed the land to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. That through back-breaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast, taught the colonists to grow rice, grew and picked cotton, making it, at the height of slavery, America's most valuable commodity. We forget that they built the plantations of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, visited today by thousands of tourists, captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop her dome.<sup>1</sup> The jarring disparity between America's founding ideals and its lived reality is at the heart of our nation.

After I preached this spring about Black Lives Matter, a congregant wrote me to let me know that his family had worked hard to get where it had, and blacks merely needed to do the same, that nothing was for free. To make such a statement is to ignore white Americans' centuries-long economic head start that most effectively maintains racial caste today. It is to imagine a 100 yard race in which the average white person in the US starts out twenty yards before the finish line, while the black person not only runs the full 100 yards but does so over hurdles, around detours, without running shoes, while being tripped, and with a referee that cheats. "The scale of destruction during the 1900's," writes Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of the 1619 Project, "is incalculable. Black farms were stolen, shops burned to the ground. ...Even black Americans who did not experience theft and violence were continuously denied the ability to build wealth." They were denied entry into labor unions and union jobs that ensured middle-class wages. Black wealth stands today at 10% of white wealth — for every dollar a white person owns, a black person owns a dime. Black Americans were legally relegated into segregated, substandard neighborhoods and segregated, substandard schools.<sup>2</sup> Even 66 years after Brown vs Board of Education, American schools are as segregated today as they were in the 1970's. So many privileges that were and are available to us by virtue of being white — a good public school education, a safe neighborhood in which to live, adequate health care, fair housing, the protection of the law, the passing down of generational wealth, good jobs— are not equally available to Black Americans.

It is the denial of this reality, that Coates calls the Dream, that our perfect homes and perfect lawns and Memorial Day cookouts are the fruits of our hard work and not systemic oppression begun with slavery, perpetuated in systemic racism, whose dividends we reap daily. Our lives are buffered by white privilege — where a black man

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<sup>1</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The Idea of America," NYT Magazine, August 18, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

lands in jail or dead for a minor traffic violation, our lives are buoyed by a raft of second chances. Coates sees white families walking in gentrified, formerly black neighborhoods, and imagines their sons “commanding entire sidewalks with their tricycles.” No one ever told them they had to be twice as good just to get by. Coates writes, “The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs.” As long as we imagine that we are somehow people without any race — just Americans — as opposed to black people or brown people, people to whom race pertains — we participate in racism, even as we deny it.

At this moment, I can feel you getting uncomfortable, squirming in your seats, perhaps wanting to turn this thing off right now. Please don't. Please stay. This is uncomfortable for me and for all of us. I imagine you saying, “I'm not a bad person. I'm not a racist,” and by that, I think you mean that you don't harbor hateful feelings or say hateful words or harbor prejudice. And I am sure that is true. And yet, racism persists. Racism persists because it is deeply embedded in our lives, because the systems and institutions that keep it in place are mighty, and we benefit from the privilege we are afforded by them. What exactly do I mean? Listen for a moment to the words of minister and professor, Michael Dyson, writing about police violence: “For God's sake, imagine little Johnny being executed because he drank too much liquor and mouthed off at the cops. Imagine little Jill getting her blonde hair yanked and her arms pulled behind her back and being slapped around and beat down because she dared ask why she was being stopped. Or being thrown around her classroom because she didn't want to give up her phone. Imagine seeing video clips of cops high-fiving each other after one of them heartlessly shoots down your unarmed buddy Larry for no good reason. Imagine hearing one cop whisper to a fellow cop that he should make sure his body camera is turned off.”<sup>3</sup> As I read each of these scenarios, my whole being recoils. I would not for a minute tolerate my children or my beloveds being treated in this way. And yet, I realized painfully, that for all the reading, thinking, protesting, and speaking out I have done, I do tolerate these iniquities happening to black people's children. I abhor them but I accept them. I almost expect them to happen. My point is that as long as we are, each of us, not working against racism, we are complicit in it.

I want to turn our attention this morning into how our Jewishness plays into this story, because I think it is complicated and the complications can be difficult to unpack. I have heard some Jews say, “Hey, this is all true, but we weren't here. We weren't part of this story. When blacks were enslaved in America, with a few exceptions, we were busy being killed somewhere else.”

Yes, that is true. But most of us, I think, claim our identity as proud Americans, and if we are proud Americans, if we see ourselves as heirs to the legacy of Washington and Madison and Lincoln, then we claim this story, all of it. And, unfortunately, this story did not end with the Declaration of Emancipation. In the 50's and 60's, as blacks moved into Jewish neighborhoods, we moved out. Our white privilege enabled us to buy

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, St Martin's Press, 2017, p.190

houses in the suburbs, sometimes in places where we had previously been excluded, and to send our kids to good schools in those suburbs, sometimes becoming the landlords, even slumlords, of the places we left behind. Maybe we don't always think of ourselves as white — it is within my father's lifetime that signs at resorts in upstate New York read, "No Coloreds, No Dogs, No Jews," — but it is the fact of our whiteness that enabled us to pass in America and to enjoy a raft of privilege that comes with that whiteness.

But, you say, there's anti-semitism, and it's worse than ever. That is also true and complicated. Because a Jew, despite wealth or privilege, might very well feel afraid inside, might be keenly aware of the genocide of our people only 75 years ago, and might not feel entirely secure in America. That reality is not visible on the outside but it is real, despite wealth, success and privilege.

And it is also true that it is not either-or. It is not the case that you can only work against anti-Semitism or racism, but that you can't take both on, or that as long as there is anti-Semitism, you are too oppressed to fight racism. More than that, these ideologies are intertwined and mutually dependent. "Antisemitism forms the theoretical core" of white nationalism. Unable to account for the success of the civil rights movement, or feminism, or gay rights, or the election of a black President, considering the supposed inferiority of blacks, women, and gays, white nationalists believe that the Jews are the cause of their problems, a secret deep state manipulating everything from television, banking, entertainment, education and the government toward their insidious ends. Antisemitism is not incidental to white nationalism — anti semitism is the lynchpin of its ideology.<sup>4</sup>

Our liberation is deeply tied up with the liberation of Black Americans, as it is, in fact, with everyone else's. This pandemic has certainly shown us that in bold strokes. My health and safety depend directly on yours.

Some of you may have read that the Black Lives Matter platform contains anti-Israel statements. This is true. Painfully. But I would caution you not to wash your hands of BLM because of it. In fact, what has happened across the country and the world, is an enormous grass-roots movement. A poll early this summer showed that 76% of Americans support Black Lives Matter. The movement is not being orchestrated by some central command with an anti-Israel platform. The movement is happening locally and grass roots. The need is dire. And to the extent that some of the leadership of BLM is anti-Zionist, we only have power to change it if we are in relationship and coalition with black leaders. My rabbinic colleagues who are engaged in deep justice work have found, again and again, that when they have built relationships with black leaders, they can, if not sway them on the issue of Israel, at least get them to leave it off the table at the local rally, at least get them to understand that the issue is

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Ward, "Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism," The Public Eye, June 29, 2017.

complicated and really has no bearing on this one. Only with our ongoing support will we be able to change this dialogue.

What can we do? We can learn more. We can interrupt racism when we hear it. We can make a point of getting to know more black people and listening to them. We can protest. We can work for justice. Today my goal is encourage you to think a little more deeply or broadly and to begin to embrace the fact that you, that all of us have a role to play here. I hope that you will take time today to think about what you can specifically do about racism that will be more than whatever you did last year. If you don't know the answer, there is a group forming right now in our synagogue to explore that very question. Join it. If we don't all take on racism together, not only for the good of black Americans, but for our own good and our country's good, we will inevitably pass the scourge of racism on to another generation.

In this year of so many losses, one of the great losses we suffered was the passing of Congressman John Lewis. I had the privilege of hearing Lewis speak in person a couple years ago and I am forever grateful to have been in the presence of this great American. Lewis taught us that, "ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what [he called] good trouble, necessary trouble." That is what we must do — get ourselves in good trouble.

In this trouble-filled year, one of the most enduring images will be John Lewis' casket draped with an American flag, laid out on a horse-drawn carriage, crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge one last time. As we bid farewell to a great American patriot, may we too be blessed to cross that bridge, to seek peace and justice for all Americans, black, white, or brown, to fulfill the promise for which he lived and died, the promise of America.