

Yom Kippur Morning *Tze u'Lemad*

“He shall take some of the blood on his fingers and spread it on the altar, and take panfuls of glowing coals and incense behind the curtain, he shall slaughter the goat laden with sins. Thus he shall purge the sanctuary of transgression and uncleanness, and all the sins of all of the Israelites.” (Leviticus chapter 16, synopsis)

On Yom Kippur morning, the High Priest gets his hands dirty. Bloody and smoky. So filthy that he has to take his clothes and burn them, bathe and risk his own life with fire and the weight of our personal and public injustice.

When we sin, according to Torah’s cultic system, we pollute the atmosphere. Our transgressions are a public smog which is inhospitable to the presence of God, which appears in cloud-form. The presence of God cannot be present when we perpetuate corruption and injustice. When we sin, God can’t breathe. The process of burning our sins clears the air. God returns, we all are purified.

The Yom Kippur ritual isn’t that the high priest thinks about what should happen and says magic words, even prayers. The ritual of Yom Kippur is physical and dirty. He stares the fire head on. It is a holiday of direct action. That is what we are called upon to do. To take the first step. To stand in the spaces.

“You are standing on a site where enslaved people were warehoused.

This is the sign that welcomed 31 JRC members in Montgomery, Alabama to The Legacy Museum, the racial injustice and economic inequality history museum created by Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative. The 11,000-square-foot museum is where tens of thousands of enslaved people were trafficked during the height of the domestic slave trade.

The museum, opened last April, documents the continuous legacy of racism from Slavery to Mass Incarceration - a legal step by step uninterrupted arc of injustice that has never stopped, only taken new shapes. The racism codified by the slave trade has never ended. And yet, we talk about slavery, lynchings and racial terror and inequity as though these were historic events.

For 3 days in July, we stood on these spaces - The Legacy Museum, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice - the Memorial to Lynching, The Rosa Parks Museum, Freedom Riders Museum, Southern Poverty Law Center, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Court Square. There is a confederate flag at the top of each historical marker in Montgomery.

Last March, Laurie Goldstein and Beth Lange came to me with their vision, to go and learn - *tze u'lemad* - to these new museums, and to reframe sites in Montgomery and the root places of racism and injustice that continue to be the fabric of America. I am proud of JRC and our lay leadership for making this trip not only possible but deeply meaningful. Anne Wildman, Taal Hasak-Lowy, and Todd Hasak-Lowy facilitated sessions to process and express our experiences, and many others chaired dinners and coordinated travel and discussions.

Laurie and Beth will represent JRC at the National Reconstructing Judaism convention in November, as a model for how congregations can integrate experiential learning for social justice. I am grateful for their hours of research and careful planning that brought this to fruition. I am also grateful to Julia, for I could only immerse in 3 days of experiential learning with her devotion to managing our family here solo.

A few snapshots from the places we stood:

Standing at Court Square and looking up the street at the Capitol, white and stark and high against the sky. We looked to the corner, where Rosa Parks boarded the bus. We looked down the street to the riverfront, where hundreds of thousands came through the central port. Now a fountain; it was the marketplace where people were bought and sold, families wrenched apart. We have only scratched the surface of facing our national shame.

Standing in the Alabama state capitol building, the destination of the Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March, which still boasts a statue of Jefferson Davis, preserves the room in the state senate chambers where the Confederate constitution was signed into law. Standing in the capitol building was like standing in the pages of an outdated, whitewashed elementary school textbook, its photographs just as bland and flat. A State Capitol guard mentioned casually that there was a new museum over by the riverfront and new memorial, but he didn't know much about it. He hadn't been over there, meaning ½ mile away. He didn't say the word lynching.

Standing in The Freedom Riders museum, the former Greyhound Bus Station. The tour begins in front of the bricked in doorway, where black passengers were dropped off to wait outside, often with no bathroom or water, and the perspective that we just walked in the "whites only" door.

Standing at the Riverwalk. I used to love historic riverwalks, and while I love beautiful strolls in rehabbed neighborhoods, I can no longer ignore that many of these riverwalks - like in Montgomery, were the geographic feature that allowed for the slave trade to flourish. The cafes and landscaped breezeways were the sites where enslaved Africans were sold down the river in chain. The cruelty of selling people.

Standing before the Montgomery seal, which holds two truths, the two identities that sit, rarely mingling, and stark: The Cradle of the Confederacy and the Birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. There is active opposition. The New Jim Crow flourishes. Both are present, but there is no justice.

I am ashamed.

Until recently, tours of Montgomery only included sites that refer to slavery, lynching, segregation racism in the past tense. The work of the Equal Justice Initiative reframes this - As Bryan Stevenson teaches, "it is impossible to go to Germany, to South Africa, to Rwanda - all countries with genocide and apartheid in their histories - and not see public markers that acknowledge reconciliation, or at least admittance to the massacres that took place there. If you visited any of those countries, markers and memorials would line the itinerary. Why not the United States? We have not yet begun our reconciliation." The gut punch and overwhelm is a necessary start.

I had always learned that Rosa Parks was tired. She worked a long day, and she decided she was done. Yes that is true. What is also known is that Rosa Parks was the secretary to fellow NAACP member E.D. Nixon, who was a strategist who actively sought ways to challenge segregation. Nixon sent Parks to organizer training two years before she refused to give up her seat. It wasn't necessarily supposed to be Parks - Claudette Colvin volunteered for the Civil Disobedience. Yet she was a single pregnant teen, and her skin was darker, and organizers did not think she would be the best face of the movement. While it wasn't known when the action would take place, when it did on Thursday, boycott letters were already written and they were mimeographed to distribute in Church on Sunday for Boycott on Monday.

We stood in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church basement and in the office where Nixon enlisted the new preacher, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, age 26, to inspire on the front lines. The real power moves were maintained by the carpool organizers and the revivalists and bail bond organizers. Small moves that moved the resistance forward. Forward, although not to victory yet. We pondered, what are the small moves we are called to take now?

12.5 million Africans were trafficked as slaves

10.7 million survived the middle passage

Why don't we know that number? We are quick to know 6 million or 11 million. We are invested in knowing one historic massacre, why have we not given the same attention to this injustice?

According to EJI:

In many communities like Montgomery, Alabama – which by 1860 was the capital of the domestic slave trade in Alabama – there is little understanding of the slave trade, slavery, or the longstanding effort to sustain the racial hierarchy that slavery created. In fact, an alternative narrative has emerged in many Southern communities that celebrates the slavery era, honors slavery's principal proponents and defenders, and refuses to acknowledge or address the problems created by the legacy of slavery. The convict leasing and sharecropping systems were used to restore white economic dominance, and discriminatory laws deprived black people of political rights. Violent intimidation was the method of enforcement.

We must *tze-u'lemad* - go and learn. Stand at the sites and actually see the history, rather than the whitewashed elementary school versions that were so grossly inadequate to begin with, or even the unidimensional newspaper articles. Yes, you could go on your family vacation or do it by yourself. But traveling with a group from our beloved community, from JRC, where we can process and think and the challenge and then blow off some steam in the evening together talking and celebrating our humanity, this work is what this is all about. Experiential Jewish learning means experiencing what our texts are calling us to do, digesting it, and building relationships.

What would you have done in the era of Slavery in the United States? When lynchings happened in your county? In the moments of the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 60s? The same is required of us now. This is embedded so deeply. We have to dig it out. We must.

We have to go there and see it with our own eyes. We have to open our mouths.

We have to walk in with our own selves to make the offering. No one can do it for us.

On this day, the 10th day of the 7th month, which is today, we are to do this ritual - not just the Priest, but the Israelites, and the non-Israelites in our tent.

One of the innovations we are bringing to JRC is a more collaborative approach to our programming. Not only do we hope to develop more voices and a more diverse range of offerings, but we are working to cross-pollinate across committees so that we draw a tighter line between the learning we do with our minds and hearts and the work that we do with our hands. So we both *tze* - go - and *lemad* - learn.

We are about living our values. We will take another trip to Montgomery. If you are interested in going, if you have capacity to take a leadership role, speak up. We will do it, the detailed template is already here.

We are planning a trip to Washington DC, to the United States Holocaust Museum to see the exhibit Americans and the Holocaust, an exhibit JRC member Danny Greene curated, which will be open for the next 3 years. We imagine traveling as a group, not only to this museum, but to the African American Museum, the

Native American History museum, to see other ways in which our histories are intertwined. And perhaps we will have an opportunity to connect with Reconstructionists in the DC area. We are looking for coordinators for this trip.

How will you stand up?

This March, JRC teens will have the opportunity to go to Portland Oregon with teens from 3 other Reconstructionist communities to explore homelessness and urban poverty with Tivnu, and will hopefully grow into an annual trip to various locations. Where else should we go? What are the sites that you want to see through Jewish lenses?

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice reads:

“For the hanged and the beaten, for the shot, drowned and burned, for the tortured, tormented and terrorized, for those abandoned by the rule of law. We will remember. Hope because hopelessness is the enemy of justice. With courage because peace requires bravery. With persistence because justice is a constant struggle. With faith because we shall overcome.

This place, right here, is a place of Hope, of Courage, of Persistence, of Faith. We must use all of these, step by step. We must bring these from ourselves and this beloved community into these places.

Anthony Ray Hinton, a black man from Alabama, reflected on a moment about 45 years ago. Hiding in a ditch with a friend by the side of the road, for fear that a passing white-driven car would kill him:

I took a deep breath. Looking up at the sky I knew that I could get angry or I could have some faith. It was always a choice. This was God’s country and I chose instead to love every single shade of blue that the sky wanted to show me. I listened as the car came closer. I wanted to protect him. Protect myself. Protect my mom and my sisters and brothers. Protect everyone in this whole world who couldn’t walk down a street without feeling some kind of fears. This was something that I didn’t want to get used to. The soil was full of the sweat and tears and blood of guys just like us. Guys forced to the ground because of the color of their skin. This was something that should never be normal. Let’s get going, I said, and we climbed out of the ditch and continued our long walk home. -Anthony Ray Hinton, The Sun Does Shine

Anthony Ray Hinton was later arrested and spent 30 years on Death Row for a crime he did not commit. He was exonerated in 2015. *“Ray Hinton resisted mightily the notion that he was arrested, charged, and wrongly convicted because of his race, but he ultimately couldn’t accept any other explanation. He was a poor man in a criminal justice system that treats you better if you are rich and guilty than if you are poor and innocent. Reading his story is difficult but necessary. We need to learn things about our criminal justice system, about the legacy of racial bias in American and the way it can blind us to just and fair treatment of people. We need to understand the dangers posed by the politics of fear that create systems like our capital punishment system, and the political dynamics that have made some courts and officials act so irresponsibly. We also need to learn about human dignity, about human worth and value. We need to think about the fact that we are all more than the worst thing we have done.” --Bryan Stevenson*

We can start right now.

In Evanston, there are 17 schools who serve K-8th grade. PTAs who have significant majority white populations have often raised over \$200,000 annually for students. PTAs who have significant majority black populations often raised between \$12,000 and \$16,000 annually. The PTA Equity Project is a collaborative effort across the district to address disparities in PTA fundraising opportunities among schools, which often result in inequitable experiences for students. This is a shining example of how the systems of employment,

housing, accessibility, childcare, and more intersect with racial identity and racial inequity. Encourage your school to join the PTA equity project, eat at Evanston restaurants next week to support it, and ask the question: how does racism play a role in inequities in our communities?

Not any single one of us knows all there is to know about racism, or all there is to know about creating racial justice and economic opportunity in this country. If we did, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Or, we would have chosen to look the other way, which is indeed a bigger problem. This is why for our learning theme this year, JRC is focusing on Racial Equity. I am proud of the work our Racial Equity Task Force, co-chaired by Jennifer Jaffe and Mandi Wolfman. The Task Force is partnering with adult education, ritual practices, religious school, and other Tikkun Olam task forces to create programming so we all can learn this year. None of us knows enough.

We need to expose systemic racism in our communities, to be allies if we are White, and to do the work to transform the experience in this country for people who aren't. One of the unique positions that we have as a place of faith, as a synagogue, as I said last night, is to be a place in which we bring our most vulnerable selves. I can think of a few things that are more vulnerable than admitting that we as white people have all been complicit in perpetuating racism in this country. We need to understand how. The synagogue is the place that builds us up, brings us joy, and holds us as we explore our most sensitive topics. Join us to do this work here.

There is a reason that political organizer ED Nixon tapped a preacher to be a motivating face of the movement. We sing praise in our psalms and celebrate joy in our prayers. It's up to us to make sure that every single person gets to experience that joy.

In Montgomery I asked myself, why do I, a member of 3 often oppressed groups - women, Jews, LGBTQ - have the opportunities and comforts and relative securities that I do? Why do black and brown people not?

We don't have to get on airplanes. We can "go" right here. We can attend our trainings, come to JRC's Racial Equity programming all year long. Buy books at our book fair for you and your kids that raise up the experience of people of color - how many children's' books with black protagonists - let alone Jewish black protagonists - are on your shelves? Read Anthony Ray Hinton's book and come to the discussion group at 2pm today even if you haven't. We must believe people of color when they talk about the daily micro - and not micro - aggressions. They aren't complaints. They are exposing a systemic failure that we need to see and change.

What does it mean to face this legacy? The feeling that when Lisa Derman, a Holocaust survivor told me as we walked arm in arm through Auschwitz that I should walk on the sidewalk, because I as a Jewish woman could survive today and walk where my Jewish ancestors could not. I could walk in the places of death and despair, face the gates, open the door, and walk out. This is what facing history means, and and this is what learning from the past means. We have done this for Jews. This has not yet happened for Black and Brown people in our country.

EJI's museums and memorials are the very beginning of that acknowledgement. Being forced to the ground - into police cars or educational systems that disproportionately discipline black students over white students or convict to death sentences - this is still the reality of a systemically ingrained racism that permeates every social system in our country. This is what I felt, walking through the memorials of Montgomery. We may not see slaves or lynchings, but we see people forced into the ground. We may not see convict leasing or sharecroppers, but we see prisons (and if we don't, we must look harder), where 1 in 3 black men born in

2001, who will turn 18 this year, will be incarcerated at some point. We may not see hangings, but we see police shootings. This is something that should never be normal.

Antisemitism indeed informs how we might feel allied with those who are victims of racism. However - and I cannot stress this enough - in our country, in our generations, it has not been codified into laws or systems that perpetuate such injustice in the same way racism has. Jews have not been categorically enforced as inferior. Our genocides have been acknowledged. We'll be talking more about this on September 25th at Unsilence: an event co-sponsored by the Racial Equity Task Force, Gender Inclusion Task Force, and Israel Palestine Committee, and at the Racial Equity training on October 7th. I hope you'll attend. I'll be there.

Ray Hinton wrote in his book with Lara Love Hardin, The Sun Does Shine:

It's hard not to wrap your life in a story - a story that has a beginning, a middle and an end. A story that has logic and purpose and a bigger reason for why things turned out the way they did. I look for purpose in losing 30 years of my life. I try to make meaning out of something so wrong and so senseless. We all do.

We have to find ways to recover after bad things happen.

Every single one of us wants to matter. We want our lives and our stories and the choices that we make or didn't make to matter. How we live matters.

Do we choose love or do we choose hate? Do we help or do we harm?

How we live matters.

I had a few moments when writing this sermon when I realized that last year on Yom Kippur morning I also talked about racial equity. And I realized, that's exactly the point. We haven't done away with racism and we haven't begun to heal. And so it's exactly incumbent upon those of us that have a microphone to keep bringing it up again and again. Because until we all take action, nothing will change. For many in this room, talking about racism that they experience on a daily basis is inescapable. Because it is experienced on a daily basis. Choosing to talk about something else it's a luxury. That's what white privilege is.

Let us hope and pray and work for a time in which we will have brought enough healing, enough attention to the reality of history that next year I can talk about something else.

At the end of a long and tired day, when the rain was beginning and the cloud cover was thick and humid we entered the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Lush gardens welcome visitors, and lead down a trail with bronze sculptures of people in chains, workers in fields, and then the center square emerges. There are 800 hanging columns, constructed in steel over the wood floor. As we moved through the monuments, the height of the rectangles remains constant, but the floor we walked upon sloped further and further down. When it rains, the iron columns rust brown, and bleed onto the floor. We stood staring upward, surrounded by over 4,000 names of those murdered in racial terror lynchings, county by county, between 1877 and 1950. 1950. A continuous wall of water runs from the ceiling to the ground and back again, an endless flow of oceans and tears. We chanted *El Maley Rachamim*, our Jewish prayer for the rest of souls of the dead, and we chanted *S'lach lanu avinu ki chattanu* - forgives us for we have been guilty.

On the field outside the lynching sculptures are 800 identical steel boxes, laid like coffins in Potters Field, one after another after another, above ground. I have stood at enough gravesides to feel the tears and wailing and mourning in my body when I walk on such hallowed ground. When each of the counties with known lynching victims agrees to do restitution and reconciliation work - even as basic as acknowledging that lynchings took place in their counties - the EJI will transplant the monument to a public place like a courthouse or municipal square, and plant wildflowers in its place at the memorial. Eventually, this process will change the built environment of the Deep South and beyond, to more honestly reflect our history.

Imagine the fields of flowers at the mass hanging cemetery of terror. Imagine that such terror is a thing of the past, that systemic racism has been so openly acknowledged that we are able to claim that what we once were taught was not the whole story, and the truth of systemic racism and injustice is raised up. Imagine everyone calling out racism when we see it - on playgrounds and in boardrooms and in voting booths. Imagine apologies happening in the moment and change taking place. Imagine the High Priest emerging in front of the congregation on this day, bloody and dirty, the smoke and stench clearing, seeing our sins rise and the air clear and God's presence enter our sanctuary.

Now imagine you are the High Priest. How will you get bloody and dirty this year? What sins will you look in the eyes? What risk will you take to call out racism, to speak out, to carry some of the weight? What place will you stand in, and what will the voice of God sound like when you emerge?

Let us be so bold as to come back here the next time, having heard God's vocal symphony together, and all be able to breathe freely.

Tze u'Lemad. Now go and learn.

***Rabbi Rachel Weiss
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