

July 19, 2019/16 Tamuz 5779

Dear chevreh,

I just returned from a nine-day road trip with a rabbi friend touring the Deep South, including Memphis, a quick stop in Birmingham, then onto Montgomery, (and in lieu of New Orleans because of weather), Savannah and Charleston. Not only did we focus on the blues, rock and roll, soul music and beautiful historic homes, we also immersed ourselves in the history of slavery to Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the legacy of this history linking us to the systemic racism we find in many of our institutions and in the hearts of many to this day. Repeatedly I witnessed physical remnants of the places where Africans from several countries had been wrenched from their homes, kidnapped and taken to this country where those who survived were enslaved and used for labor to build this wealthy nation. I also read extensively about those who resisted in various ways throughout the ages.

From the vantage point of this painful, wonderful trip, it was chilling to hear the president this week say that four congresswomen of color should “go back” to where they came from, and perhaps even worse to hear the awful “send her back” chants of Trump supporters in North Carolina directed at Congresswoman Ilhan Omar - whether or not you support her every view.

The Rabbinical Assembly, the organization representing the Conservative movement, wrote the following earlier this week:

Telling immigrants and people in this country to “go back where they came from” is a classic example of racism and bigotry. As Jews, we are experienced with such calls and understand the clearly xenophobic implications. Everyone should condemn these offensive comments regardless of political affiliation.

We are about to begin the journey leading up to Tisha b’Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. Tomorrow is the 17th day of the Hebrew month of Tamuz, commemorating the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem, and the start of a three-week mourning period for the destruction of Jerusalem and the two Holy Temples in Jerusalem, among other tragedies which we commemorate on Tisha b’Av. For many, the 17th day of Tamuz is a fasting day although because it falls on Shabbat, for those who fast, it is the following day.

While the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed by the Roman empire, our rabbinic tradition teaches that the Second Temple was destroyed because *sinat chinam*, groundless, gratuitous hatred. When we turn on each other, we are weaker and our communities collapse.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote that just as the Second Temple was destroyed and the people were scattered because of *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, so too the Third Temple will be rebuilt and the people will be gathered together again though *ahavat chinam*, baseless love. While most moderns Jews are certainly not envisioning the building of a Third Temple, we are hoping for a time when hatred ceases and differences are celebrated rather than used to divide people.

As I return from my deep dive into the history of civil rights in this country, I will try to bring with me some of the sorrow and inspiration I experienced. We know the disastrous effects of racism and hatred in our country's history, and we see how these impulses are destructive and dangerous yet today. Along with being inspired by all those pursuers of justice who helped to bring about the Civil Rights movement and move our country in the right direction, let us all engage in ahavat chinam, causeless, baseless love, trying to hear each other's perspectives and stories in order to reverse the dehumanization we are currently experiencing in our country.

***Next Friday evening, July 26th, I will be delivering a sermon inspired by my trip and connected to the Torah portion.

I look forward to seeing you at Shabbat services tonight at 7:30.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Diana