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I found out about the shooting Saturday morning. The night before, just a few minutes from where I live, a police officer had shot Tony Robinson seven times at close range in the chest. Robinson was unarmed. He was bi-racial. He was just 19 years-old.

Seven shots to the chest when he didn't have a weapon? I couldn't help thinking that there *had* to be another way an officer could protect himself without firing seven shots. I couldn't help wondering what if, instead of Williamson Street it had been Langdon Street, in the midst of fraternity row – would the outcome have been the same?

A week later I was driving with my kids on a side street on the near east side, and we came upon a Black Lives Matter protest. "What are they doing?" asked my six-year-old.

There is nothing that helps you clarify your ideas more than having to explain them to a six year-old.

I began haltingly. "We've talked about how where we live black people are not treated in the same ways as white people – lots of times they're not treated fairly by the police or in schools or at their jobs."

"But there aren't slaves anymore," she reminded me.

"That's true, there aren't slaves anymore. But there are so many ways that black people are still treated unfairly. Sometimes they can't get the same jobs as white people, because white people don't trust them or think they're smart enough. Many black people are poor even though they work hard, and they don't have enough money for all the things that we can give to you. Important things like healthy food, warm clothes, decent homes, and good childcare. Black people are often treated as if it's their fault that they are poor. Slavery in our country may have happened a long time ago but it still shapes black people's lives today..."

"But what about the march, Ima?"

"Well, these people are marching because they want to change all that. They want things to be more fair. They're saying that black people are just as important and special as white people, and if we want to make things more fair then we have to think about it and talk about it and change it, even when we're trying to get home or we're busy doing other things."

One thing I've learned in the past year is that we're often busy doing other things. We're constantly trying to juggle different priorities, and working for racial justice doesn't ever seem to make it to the top. Sometimes we act like the prophet, Jonah, whose story we read on Yom Kippur. When God calls on him to go to the city of Nineveh to cry out against the people to stop their injustices towards each other, he runs the other way.

I'm sympathetic towards Jonah when God first confronts him. He must have been confused and scared. Maybe he wasn't sure what to do. Maybe he didn't believe he could really make change.

When we are confronted with moral challenges, many of us also run. Or maybe not run, but we edge away. I see how we do it when confronted with Madison's racial divide. I understand it, and I'm just as guilty of it. The truth is, if we are white we don't usually experience the effects of racism every day, like the glares or the insults or the jokes based on people's assumptions of who we are. If we are white we don't usually experience the effects of racial profiling or voter ID laws. If we are white we don't usually experience discrimination in employment, housing, or education.

We edge away from the statistics, because they *are* overwhelming. In plain terms, Dane County has the worst racial disparities of *any county* in the country. It's shocking, but the numbers consistently point to an enormous divide between white Madison and black Madison.

According to the 2013 "Race to Equity" report, the official unemployment rate for African-Americans in Dane County is 5 times that of whites. The number of black children who are poor is 13 times that of white children – at 74 percent. African-American adults were arrested at a rate of more than 8 times that of whites in Dane County.

And while it's true that the disparities are so great because whites do exceptionally well in a university town like Madison, it's not the whole picture. It's not the whole picture because African-Americans regularly discuss how unwelcome they feel in this city, how the lack of affordable housing makes it so difficult to live here, and how they are regularly stopped and questioned by police officers when there is little to no cause.

Jonah must have been overwhelmed as well. The people of Nineveh also had intractable social problems. Jonah decides to flee from God, so he boards a ship for Tarshish, in the opposite direction as Nineveh, and falls asleep in the bottom of the ship. God, knowing what Jonah is doing, causes a huge storm to prevent his escape. The ship rocks precariously in the water, and the sailors furiously try to dump their freight to make it lighter and save it from sinking. Finally, the captain wakes Jonah from his sleep.

Or in the words of the midrash:

Jonah, in the anguish of his soul, sank into a sound sleep. The captain of the ship came to him and said, "Behold, we are standing between death and life, and you are sound asleep! (*Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 10, translation by Aviva Zornberg)

It's a fair indictment. "We are standing between death and life, and you are sound asleep!"

In our society it's African-Americans who are standing between death and life, and too often death prevails. We remember: Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hall, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson – to name just a few unarmed black people killed by police officers in the last year or so.

Death prevailed in Charleston as well. We remember: The Rev. Clementa Pinckney, the Rev. Sharonda Singleton, Myra Thompson, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lee Lance, Cynthia Hurd, the Rev. Daniel L. Simmons Sr., the Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Susie Jackson – all victims of Dylan Roof’s white supremacist attack at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Will we, like Jonah, stay sleep?

Or will we heed the words of the Talmud: “At a time when the community is suffering, no one should say, ‘I will go home, eat, drink, and be at peace with myself’” (Taanit 11a).

I believe we do not want to live in a city with such a deep racial divide. I believe that each of us fundamentally values equality. I believe we are eager to find a solution. But I also believe that there is no easy solution and that in liberal Madison white people are part of the problem.

Those of us who are white are part of the problem because we, as a group, have tremendous privilege, and when we don’t use that privilege to fight against racial injustice we perpetuate it.

It’s uncomfortable to talk about and it’s difficult to change, but Yom Kippur is a time to talk about uncomfortable things and it’s a time to commit ourselves to making difficult change.

Yom Kippur is a time when we talk about responsibility, both individually and collectively. We are responsible for our behavior and we are responsible to our neighbor. We are responsible because remaining silent in the face of injustice makes us complicit in that injustice.

As the Talmud teaches:

Anyone who is able to protest against the sins of one's household and does not do so is held responsible for the sins of the members of the household. Anyone who is able to protest against the sins of one's community and does not do so is held responsible for the sins of the community. Anyone who is able to protest against the sins of the entire world and does not do so is punished for the sins of the entire world (Shabbat 54b).

A core part of taking responsibility is for us to understand where we have come from. We can begin by considering our own history in the United States and the conclusions we draw from it.

For those of us who trace our heritage back to Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants who came to the United States in search of a better life, we remember the bitter experiences that they and their children endured. It was not that long ago that American Jews suffered from consistent and persistent discrimination, both on institutional and personal levels. We remember discrimination in university admissions, in hiring practices, in housing, and in anti-Semitic slurs and assaults.

We also remember Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement. Many of us have been deeply inspired by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. King in Selma or by the disproportionate number of Jews who risked their lives on the freedom buses through the South. We remember the young Jews, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who along with James Cheney were murdered by the Klan as they were fighting for black voting rights.

These stories of our past are important. They shape who we are and how we see ourselves in the present. Our minds jump to these stories when we consider the issue of race today. We sympathize with the black community because our grand-parents also experienced discrimination. We take pride that our community was on the front lines in Selma, fighting for justice alongside African-Americans.

But history is never that simple. We have a tendency to see Jews as either victims or heroes. The truth is that we weren't always oppressed and we didn't always do the right thing. That makes our history less glamorous, maybe, but taking responsibility means learning about who we really are and what we really did – not using parts of our history as a pass to get ourselves out of difficult conversations.

White, Ashkenazi Jews have been able to make use of our white skin and integrate as part of white America. Not always, and passing carries with it its own complexities, but we have made enormous strides because we have been able to blend in and assimilate, a privilege that black people do not have, and because the larger society's attitudes towards Jews have changed.

Jews "became white" – meaning that white, Christian America now largely sees us as part of them, not as immigrants who don't belong. And while anti-Semitic acts still do happen in the United States, most of us do not live our daily lives in fear that we will be stopped by the police, not be hired for a job, or be the victim of a hate crime because we are Jewish.

It's hard to recognize and own our power and privilege. But it's important that we do it so that we can as a community can help to end racial injustice.

The process of doing *teshuvah*, of turning back to our best selves and making real change in the year to come, begins by reflecting on what we have done and how we have fallen short. We do this in all areas of our lives, and if we choose, we can also do this in order to take responsibility for the racial injustice around us. We can hang in there when we see things we don't like about ourselves, when we feel defensive or self-righteous. When we feel that our feelings matter more than other people's feelings. When, like Jonah, we want to turn away.

We want to turn away because making amends and repairing what's broken and stepping across the racial divide require that we make ourselves uncomfortable and vulnerable. We gather each year to open ourselves to this discomfort and vulnerability and to commit to doing something new to challenge ourselves in the year to come.

Often we look for the perfect place to step into this work, but I don't think there is a perfect place. I think there are lots of imperfect places that might lead somewhere if we're diligent and open-hearted, if we're willing to stay committed even when it's hard, if we let go of our assumptions, if we're patient and don't move on when something more interesting comes along.

This past year our community made a commitment to doing a reading program at Christ the Solid Rock Baptist Church, a black church on the east side of Madison. I never thought that I would be going to church twice a month, but I do, because it was one way I found that I and

members of our community could step across the racial divide. There aren't many opportunities in Madison to do this, so when the church's pastor, the Rev. Everett Mitchell, invited us into their place of worship, we stepped forward.

It is an imperfect relationship. When I began I think I was expecting to have a kumbaya moment, some really meaningful experience that would make me feel like I was doing something worthwhile.

I've now been to the church 15 times or so and I haven't felt it yet. The first five or six times I was really uncomfortable. I felt very white and very out of place. I wondered whether their members wanted me to be there. They were cordial, but they didn't throw open their arms to make sure I was getting my needs met.

The reading program is also imperfect. Kids come and go, and some of them don't want to be there. Pastor Mitchell keeps saying that the point of us being there is not to help these poor black kids read but to find a way across the divide, to respectfully enter black space, to slowly form relationships with people who are really different from us.

The next five or six times I went I got a better understanding of what he was talking about. I started walking into the sanctuary after the service ended and I struck up short conversations with people I recognized. I started going to the church's fish fries. A couple times someone remembered my name and said hello to me.

One of the challenging things about this relationship is that I don't feel like I can gracefully back out of it. It's not that they need me – they really don't – but I made a commitment to stepping across this divide, and I don't want to be one more white person who realigns her priorities and moves on to something else.

When the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai and accepted God's covenant they said, "*Na'aseh v'nishma* – We will do and we will understand" (Exodus 24:7). Do first, understand later. What a problematic teaching for those of us who like to carefully think through things and analyze the purpose of what we're doing and consider the alternatives *before* we do the action.

But I finally learned the wisdom of *na'aseh v'nishma* from going to this church. Do it first, consistently and self-reflectively and patiently, and only slowly will you begin to understand what you are doing.

On a deeper level, I still don't exactly understand what we're doing. But I believe in this program, and I hope that more people from our community will get involved. I have really grown from my involvement. Participating as a congregation is a concrete way for us to learn together, to reflect together, and to step across the racial divide together.

Sometimes when presented with an opportunity we just need to jump in.

Jonah was forced to jump in. Actually the sailors end up throwing him overboard, and he is swallowed by a great fish. Only after three days in the fish's belly does he repent and agree to go to Nineveh.

The people of Nineveh were guilty of great injustices towards each other, but by the end of the story they really do go through a social transformation. Jonah really wasn't much of a hero in the story. He just wanders into Nineveh after being forced by God to do so and proclaims that the people do *teshuvah*. He was resentful before he did it and he was resentful after he did it.

The heroes of this story are the people of Nineveh; they are the ones who make change. They did the hard, slow work of righting their wrongs, of fighting against their inequities, of protecting their most vulnerable. Change came from the ground up, from the people. Only after they did this work did the king join in, forced to follow the people's lead.

I think we can be like the people of Nineveh. I think we can create social transformation – slowly and imperfectly, but with sincere commitment and passion.

As Rabbi Tarfon taught in Pirkei Avot, "It is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it" (2:16).

Gemar chatimah tovah – may this be a year of taking responsibility, stepping up to moral challenges, and crossing the racial divide.