In America back in May, a 46 year old African American man, George Floyd, died as a Minneapolis policeman knelt on the back of his neck for almost 9 minutes. After watching his death "live" – if one can say that about watching a man die – many Americans felt called to engage in serious soul searching. Among those Americans, I also found myself searching that week for poetry that might speak to the present moment, or what had led to it, and I stumbled across a powerful piece by Aboriginal poet Frank Doolan. Known as Riverbank Frank, he writes:

> Black Woman, Black Woman, my mother the earth,
> Soul of my substance the rich black dirt,
> Coloured blood red a black man's blood,
> Absorbed for eternity by your endless love.
> You gave birth to me just yesterday,
> What makes you think I drifted away?
> You sheltered my soul from the genocide,
> What I feel for you is absolute pride.
> I'm Young and I'm Vital, I'm Black and I'm Free.
> If I hurt you I'm sorry, I'm just being me.
> Times they're a changing and people change too,
> That don't mean I changed how I feel for you…
> 'Cause you are forever my mother the earth,
> The soul of my substance the rich black dirt.
> Coloured blood red, a Black Man's blood,
> Absorbed for eternity by your endless love.[i]

The imagery in this poem of the ground swallowing a person's blood reminded me of two dramatic events in the Torah: One, when the ground swallowed the rebel Korach, who protested against Moses and Aaron in his fight for a greater democracy. The other, when Abel's blood cried out from the ground after he was killed by his brother, Cain.

But the blood absorbed by the earth in Frank Doolan's poem is specifically a *black man's* blood. So for me it also spoke, chillingly, to the image of George Floyd pinned to the ground, as he suffocated to death at the hands and knee of the white officer. Yes, this is an American image, that occurred on American soil. But we all share the same earth – the same earth that the Aboriginal poet speaks of as his embracing mother. There are too many instances—in all countries—of mother earth embracing a son who dies by the hands of his own brother—embracing a son whose skin colour matches hers, be it the "rich black [Australian] dirt" of the poem, or the black tarmac of street pavement in Minneapolis. There are too many images throughout history of brothers killing brothers, of racist brutality, of what our tradition calls *sinat chinam* – hatred without cause.

Before there was ever a Stolen Generation, and before there was ever a slave trade – the very first killing of a brother by his brother began with Cain and Abel – and it happens in the very first parasha of Torah; in the eyes of our tradition, this occurs near the very beginning of time. Fratricide appears to be an eternal problem in the human experience.

So I've been thinking, ever since George Floyd's death, about what "eternal" means, and about a classic Jewish story – the story of King Solomon's ring. King Solomon sent his servant out to find him a magical ring that has the power to make a sad person happy, and a happy person sad. After much searching, the servant comes back with a ring that isn't really magical – it just bears an inscription. The inscription says, in Hebrew, *Gam zeh ya'avor*. "This too shall pass." This ring reminds the sad person to be happy because "this too shall pass." It reminds the happy person that one's bounty can be fleeting too, so don't get too excited – "this too shall pass." There's supposed to be comfort in this idea of *gam zeh ya'avor*.

But when I think about *institutionalised* racism endured by the black community in America—not only the dehumanisation and brutality, but also what took place for decades after slavery was abolished: from segregated schools to the suppression of voting rights… and how most African Americans weren't permitted to buy houses in certain neighbourhoods, so they never accumulated wealth to pass on to their children and raised their families in poverty. When I think about how that poverty has led to a black community that is undernourished, underinsured, and unable to work from home, such that today, black people are more than twice as likely to die of Covid as white people.[ii] When I think about the decades long agony endured by the Stolen Generation in Australia, many of whom would have lost their parents *and* their children. Or about the disproportionate number of Aboriginal deaths in custody, even since the Royal Commission,[iii] and the disproportionate rate of suicide in indigenous communities,[iv] and how this will impact children growing up without a parent, for instance. When I think of Holocaust survivors whose trauma is now found to pass down to their children biologically,[v] and about the scourge of neo-Nazism that learns from the Shoah not "never again," but how to use symbols and slogans to further their dark and murderous agendas. When I think of these ongoing tragedies, I have to ask myself, does *everything* really pass? Because it seems that discrimination actually *endures*, and just takes different forms in different generations, and trauma actually *endures* and impacts every generation differently, and poverty actually *endures* and manifests differently in different nations. These plagues don't pass and disappear; they pass *on,* to the next generation. *Gam zeh ya'avor*—this, too, shall pass? I'm not so sure. Ever since Cain and Abel, brothers have been killing brothers, and this problem feels eternal.

There's a change in our new machzor that I find confronting. The classic English "alphabet" of our sins that accompanies the Vidui confession used to be a poetic interpretation, rather than a word for word translation. The alphabet included Greed for G, and Xenophobia for X. But in our new machzor, the translation isn't alphabetical, but painfully honest, and when we get to the Hebrew word *shichatnu* the machzor

translates: "we kill." *We kill.* Maybe you and I don't go out and actively murder, but let's confess, there's an awful lot of killing that goes on under our watch as a democratic society. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, we each bear the mark of Cain, and the earth is "soaked with blood." "In a free society," he says, "some are guilty, but all are responsible."

There is, however, something redeeming—something hopeful—about finding this in our Vidui. While the translation is confronting, the machzor hints at something vitally important in Jewish thought. By listing "we kill" as a transgression that we can atone for, our machzor suggests that killing *isn't* an eternal human condition – we can learn *not* to kill. We are not killing machines, pre-programmed to keep on killing eternally.

In fact, the story of Cain and Abel doesn't take place until the *4th chapter* of Genesis. The 7 days of creation happen in the first chapter, before Cain and Abel are born. And though the first human beings, their parents Adam and Eve, transgressed, *killing* was not one of their sins. From Adam and Eve, we learn that temptation, weakness of will, exile, painful childbirth, and lust may all be part of the human condition, but killing wasn't.

What's more, there is, in the eyes of our tradition, much that is *older* than fratricide. In fact, the Mishnah teaches that in addition to all that God created during the first 6 days, God created another 10 things before the 7th day – before the first Shabbat. One of those 10 things was the ground that swallowed the rebel Korach. That is, one of God's creations was Merciful Mother Earth who embraces the blood of her children whom humanity rejects—whom human beings can't seem to treat with mercy, or decency, or dignity.

There is something older than Cain's murder of his brother – something more eternal because it is a Godly construct, created by God, when God was in charge of deciding what needed to be on the planet. A merciful earth was put in place for eternity. A merciful earth that accepts the blood of every human being without regard to the colour of one's skin or society's definition of race, because, as the Talmud teaches, no one's blood is any redder than anybody else's.[vi] Fratricide, domination of one race over another, brutality and inequality – these are *human* creations that started only later, after Shabbat, the day of completion of God's universe. So we must never accept them as eternal. We must always seek to abolish them. Apologies can be offered, constitutions amended, and restitutions made. Other interpretations of our holidays can be acknowledged, schoolchildren taught diverse narratives. Disparities can be rectified, and gaps closed – all of which may not heal past wounds, but can begin to reverse a deadly, tragic order that we have mistakenly taken as a given, if we've noticed at all.

The *yamim nora'im* remind us what is God's doing that is eternal and what is our own doing that can be undone through atonement and by making different choices. On Rosh Hashanah, the universe was created, and on Yom Kippur we consider what's in *our* power to change, and among that which we humans can change is how we treat one

another, God's children, our brothers and sisters. This is what our greatest civil rights heroes held faith in. When accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Martin Luther King said: "I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsom and jetsom in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism…that the bright daybreak of…brotherhood can never become a reality."[vii] In his famous "I have a dream" speech, he urged those who'd been "battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality" to return home "knowing that…this situation can and will be changed."[viii] He dreamt of a different tomorrow, a better humanity, and knew we could change ourselves and our society. *Gam zeh ya'avor*. This too shall pass, if only we put our minds to dreaming.

We need to dream into being a safer world for people of all shades, and that means listening to each other's dreams, hearing them, and acting on them, not suffocating them to death. The Aboriginal poets I discovered in the wake of George Floyd's death often speak of the power of dreaming. I'd like to give one of them, Indigenous Teaching Artist, Zelda Quakawoot, the final word today. She writes:

> A right to be heard
> Not censored of word
> A voice that is true
> Not a momentary view
> A word that is said
> It remains in our heads
> Of value that's true
> In both me and you
> It signals the start
> From deep in our hearts
> A sentence recalls
> From the big to the small
> It flows like a stream…
> "I have a dream…"[ix]

---

[i] *https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/arts/poems/black-woman*

[ii] https://soba.iamempowered.com/johns-hopkins-report and https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/08/13/902261618/covid-19-death-rate-for-black-americans-twice-that-for-whites-new-report-says and https://covidtracking.com/race

[iii] https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/law/royal-commission-into-aboriginal-deaths-in-custody

[iv] https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2019/09/26/suicide-rate-indigenous-australians-remains-distressingly-high

[v] https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/07/parents-emotional-trauma-may-change-their-children-s-biology-studies-mice-show-how

[vi] *Talmud Bavli*, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 74a-b

[vii] [vii] http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance_en.html

[viii] https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety

[ix] *https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/arts/poems/a-right-to-be-heard*