

If not now, tell me when!

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אֵיכָה יִשְׁבָּה בְּדָד, הָעִיר רַבְתִּי עִם--הֵיטָה, כְּאֶלְמָנָה; רַבְתִּי בְּגוֹיִם, שָׂרְתִי
בְּמַדִּינוֹת--הֵיטָה, לְמַס.
...בָּכּוּ תִבְכֶּה בְּלֵילָה

How lonely sits the city, that was full of people! She has become like a widow!

She that was great among the nations, a princess among the provinces, has become a vassal! She weeps bitterly in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks.... (Lamentations 1:1-2)

These are the opening words to the Book of Lamentations. I have been repeating the first word over and over in my mind for the last two weeks. Eicha?!? How?!?!

How did our nation come to this? How is this happening? How?!?!? And how did it take so long for us to pay attention to the pain and to the suffering, of our fellow citizens, of our neighbors, of our friends, of our fellow congregants, of our family?

What we have been seeing in our streets is not only about the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Or the murder of Breonna Taylor as she lay in her own bed in Louisville. Or Chris Cooper having the police called on him as he went bird watching in Central Park. Or Ahmaud Arbery chased and gunned down as he went for a jog in Georgia. What we are seeing are a number of different things.

One of the things that we have seen are protesters who are expressing the raw pain, frustration and rage of 400 years of systematic, institutionalized racism. The pain of being victimized by this system, and they and their loved ones are suffering, and dying in vastly disproportionate numbers, not only within the criminal justice system, but also suffering in disproportionate numbers from the Covid Virus, because African Americans are less likely to be heard or treated the same in the healthcare system as a white person, and they are more likely to suffer more egregiously when the economy plunges.

People of color are often discriminated against in our schools, not just in the classrooms, but also in the way our schools are funded. They have faced harassment and danger when they go into stores, get a cup of coffee, have a BBQ at the park, go for a drive, or even while watching television in their own homes. We are seeing generations of trauma, PTSD and stress being expressed in these demonstrations.

And we are seeing white allies finally coming out in large numbers, finally fed up, finally listening and really paying attention to what has been happening all around us.

The protestors come from different ethnic and religious groups, are people of all ages who represent the entire socio-economic spectrum, united in our desire for our country to be better than it is, to actually strive to fulfill it's promise of equality and real freedom for all who live here.

We are united in our desire to reform and replace a system that was designed to separate us, to pit us against one another, to promote economic inequality and institutionalized racism. A system that equates the value of a human being with the color of their skin. These largely peaceful protestors have been going into the streets each day to express their constitutional right and to demand that their government pay attention to them, to demand that they be able to go out into the world without fear for their lives, and demand that we finally right these historic wrongs, to recognize their basic civil and human rights.

And I believe that there is a second group that we have seen, violent looters who are different than the protestors. This group is also a mix of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Some are people who are simply taking advantage of a horrible situation to exploit and to steal, and to cause harm. And some are people who feel that the social contract has always excluded them, and therefore they are not beholden to engage in that social contract.

And don't get me wrong, I feel bad for the store owners and neighborhoods that have been pillaged and left in a shambles. It is

upsetting and scary to watch our nation's cities be torn apart. It was truly unnerving for me to drive through our midtown and downtown and see so many stores boarded up, the life work of so many individuals and families destroyed literally overnight. But I was also heartened to see that are so many people, including the protestors, who have been going downtown to try to clean up the damage that the looters had done, and to show those who had been hurt that they are they are with them.

But then, there is still another group that has been on the streets of our nation's cities, a group that I find truly terrifying. In many cities throughout the country we have seen agitators, often time it's the extremists from the far right and the far left, white agitators, anarchists and White Supremacists who come in, from near and from, to start the violence, to instigate clashes between the protestors and the police, to smash windows, set fires, loot stores, and who come in heavily armed, hoping to start a race war. These are groups that want to see the complete dismantling of our government, who hate not only African-Americans, but also law enforcement, and who despise minorities, including Jews, and see us all as invaders to a country they believe to be their own.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a civil rights and human rights activist, a refugee from Hitler's Europe, and a scholar who reminded us of our eternal obligation to heed the words of our prophets, taught that "Morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, in a free society where terrible wrongs exist, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

What we are seeing in our streets right now is an urgent wake up call that we must respond to the horrible injustices that have been centuries in the making. And a wake up call to the violent fringe that is quickly growing in numbers and in force.

I know that some of you are thinking...

"But my ancestors weren't even here when slavery existed!"

or

“My family wasn’t responsible for putting in place the old Jim Crow or the new one.”

or

“I’m not a racist, I didn’t cause any of this.”

or

“What about anti-Semitism? We have our own problems to worry about.”

So what!

If you saw your neighbors house burning, would you just watch the flames and say “I didn’t cause it, so I’m not responsible to stop it.” Or would you run to help put it out? Would you understand that your fate is intertwined with the fate of your neighbor?

Right now, it’s not our neighbors house that is on fire. It is our house, it is our country that is on fire. And it doesn’t matter who set the fire, it needs to be put out, and the house needs to be rebuilt, better than it was before. And this time, this time it needs to be on a foundation of real equality and real justice for all.

If we want to call this our country, if we want to reap the benefits that others have sowed, if we want others to care about what hurts us, then we also need to carry on our shoulders the responsibility to fix the wrongs that others started, the wrongs that so many still suffer from on a daily basis.

Because as Rabbi Heschel taught, just because we might not be guilty of creating the problem, if we don’t do something to change the status quo, then we are responsible for it’s continuation.

Heschel’s teaching is firmly rooted in the Torah, the Talmud and Jewish law. In Tractate Shabbat 54b we see that Rav, the 3rd century scholar and the Rabbi responsible for the the Talmud, as well as Rabbi Hanina, Rabbi Yochanan and Rav Chaviva all cite Rabbi Yonatan’s teaching:

“Anyone who had the capability to effectively protest the sinful conduct of the members of his household and did not protest, he himself is

apprehended for the sins of the members of his household and punished.

If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the people of his town, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the people of his town.

If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the whole world, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the whole world.”

Why did I make a point of citing all of those 3rd century rabbis as being in support of this teaching? Because we often joke about the idea of two Jews, three opinions. But here we have five rabbis, the leaders of their day, some of the architects of the Judaism that we practice, are all in agreement. All saying what Rabbi Heschel said during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, while some are guilty, all are responsible.

So what can we do, those of us who want to do something but feel overwhelmed by what we see?

The sister of Chris Cooper, the man who had the police called on him by a white woman in Central Park because he had the audacity to ask her to follow the law and put a leash on her dog, while he was simply watching birds, his sister has advice for us to help us begin to understand what we can do.

Melody Cooper said “If you’re an ally...Stand with us. Bear witness. Continue the discussion and support legal action. Refuse to accept racism in your midst, even in small ways — call out a cruel joke or rude behavior. Be brave and challenge it all. You can transform your own world through how you teach your children, and how you speak to your neighbors and co-workers. It is up to you, not to a leader nor any single protest or petition. Your everyday commitment is what will start to bring the change you want to see. Start small, step forward and let your action join with others’ to become a rising tide that cannot be stopped.”

I want to conclude with a prayer written by Rabbi Paul Kipnes called “A Psalm for Cities on Fire.”

A Psalm for our cities on fire
Aflame with the fires of fear
With anger burning ‘bout brazen brutality:
From a kneed neck Floyd’s breath snuffed out over there

A Psalm for our cities on fire
Veering vigorously toward violence and hate
Preventing protests that promote another vision:
Of justice that we all must create

A Psalm for our brothers and sisters
Who fear for their lives, black and brown
When they jog, shop, go to church, or go bird watching
With their hands held up high, or when lying down

A Psalm to remind us ‘bout justice
And the debasement that threatens their lives
Because our silence can no longer silence
The real pain of widowed husbands and wives

So Pray for our cities on fire
And sing out songs of protest ‘gainst hate
But since lives, they are holy and matter
It’s time for action; we’re way past time of debate

Following the sermon Michael Hersher sang this song:
<https://youtu.be/7bY585-fzSs>