

We must repair what has been broken
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When I was younger and my siblings and I would get together, we would often play a game I like to call “Who had it worse?” The way it’s played is that we would sit around a table and each of us would offer up story after story of childhood trauma and disappointment, each one trying to top the other. I’ll never forget the looks of horror on the faces of my husband and sister-in-law the first time they saw us play that game. Not only were they shocked by the stories, but also by our reactions to the stories. Because you see, we would laugh when someone was able to top someone else’s story. None of us were actually playing the game to win, because we already knew that anyone who was able to play the game had already lost. But we also knew that we had to be able to look at our suffering and find humor and meaning or we would all go mad.

My brothers, my sister and I all learned at an early age, that everyone’s suffering is unique. Everyone’s sense of loss or pain is real. And that there is no real point in trying to prove “who had it worse.” Rather, the point of the game was to recognize and acknowledge that we had all suffered, and that there was comfort in knowing we were not alone. Now that I’m older, I understand that wasn’t the healthiest game for us to play. But we had been children when our world were shattered, and in many ways we responded to our pain like children would.

In recent years, we have stopped playing that game and have realized that it is much healthier and more productive to simply acknowledge that we understand what each of our siblings went through, and to let them know that we see how far they have come to be who they are today.

I’ve never understood why different groups of people try to compare their suffering, there are never winners in such a game. A better thing to do is to learn from each other about what that community or individual has learned about how to embrace life, find healing and meaning through their pain and hardship, and how to live life as fully as possible again.

If I have learned anything in my life, it is this, no one goes through life unscathed, everyone suffers in some way, at some time. No not in the same way, and not with the same consequences, but everyone experiences loss and grief. And that pain is real to them. And their experiences shape how they interact with the world. Their pain has shaped them, just as our pain has shaped us. I have no patience when people try to compare which was worse, the Holocaust or slavery, racism or anti-Semitism. All of it is horrible. All of it has caused irreparable harm and suffering that has lasted for generations beyond the individuals who experienced it.

It would be so much better if different communities could simply sit with each other, and learn from the other’s reality and try to understand how each community has been shaped, and affected by, what we have each gone through.

For the last 3 ½ years I have been part of a local chapter of a national group called “The Sisterhood of Salam-Shalom.” Every chapter is made up of an equal number of Jewish and Muslim women. We meet monthly, share a meal, and teach and learn from each other something about our respective faiths or communities. And several times during the year we engage in tzedakah and community service, as well as occasional larger gatherings that have included our entire families.

Many of the women tiptoed into this group, not sure what to expect. And I think we were all surprised to discover how important this group has become to us, a real Sisterhood has formed, friendships and mutual respect and affection has blossomed. The group was founded from a desire not to be in competition with each other, but to deepen our understanding of the other. And in the process, none of us feels like an “other” any more.

In fact, for many of us, we have come to see this group as part of our extended community, people who add to the quality of our lives. When there has been an act of bigotry or violence towards either the Jewish or Muslim community, we immediately reach out to each other to offer comfort and support. As well as simply wishing each other a happy holiday whenever they occur.

It took courage to set aside our preconceived notions of each other, as well as our communal history of pain and fear, and to see the people before us as simply that, people, fellow Americans, fellow religious minorities of the Abrahamic traditions with whom we could find common ground with. It was only by first being willing to see each other’s humanity that we were then able to begin to grapple with some of the things that have divided our communities, and to begin to understand how our respective hurts and emotional scars have shaped us, as individuals and as a community.

There is a poem called “The Cure” by Albert Huffstickler that gives me great comfort in being able to understand how suffering affects us:

The Cure
Albert Huffstickler

We think we get over things.
We don’t get over things.
Or say, we get over the measles
But not a broken heart.
We need to make that distinction.
The things that become part of our experience
Never become less a part of our experience.
How can I say it?
The way to “get over” a life is to die.
Short of that, you move with it,
Let the pain be the pain,
Not in the hope that it will vanish
But in the faith that it will fit in,

Finds its place in the shape of things
and be then not any less pain but true to form.
Because anything natural has an inherent shape
And will flow towards it.
And a life is as natural as a leaf.
That's what we're looking for:
Not the end of a thing but the shape of it.
Wisdom is seeing the shape of your life
Without obliterating (getting over) a single
Instant of it.

That line "The things that become part of our experience never become less a part of our experience" is so true. It speaks to the essence of Judaism. It's why we commemorate certain moments of our history, replaying them year after year. Our ancestors understood that our collective past is always part of our personal present.

Whether we are talking about institutionalized racism, anti-Semitism, or any other form of prejudice, the wounds of our past never fully heal. Every time the scab is picked, it bleeds anew, and we have to begin the healing process once again.

In the summer of 2019, my family spent a week in Berlin. As we walked around the city I was struck by how many monuments, museums and markers there were everywhere, each acknowledging what had been done to the Jews, the disabled, the gay community and others during the Holocaust. I was surprised that in the capitol of what had once been Nazi Germany I could feel so comfortable and at ease. And then I realized it was because they were not trying to hide their past, they were trying to learn from it.

I could not help but wonder how different it must be for African-Americans in this country.

I know that I, who was born and raised here in the United States, with no direct ancestors murdered in the Holocaust, shudder when I see a swastika or Nazi insignia, as though the memory of the Holocaust was passed down to me through my DNA.

And last June, when I read that in our American military cemeteries in Texas and Utah, there were graves with Nazi swastikas and tributes to Adolph Hitler on the graves of soldiers who been taken prisoner in WWII, I could my anger rise. And in response to demands to change the headstones the VA Secretary, Robert Wilkie's said that he was looking for ways to put the grave markers "in historical context" rather than remove them.

But after weeks of complaints from veterans and leaders from the Military Religious Freedom foundation, the VA finally relented and agreed to remove the headstones and acknowledge that "their presence alongside American veterans was unforgivable." He also stated that "It is understandably upsetting to our veterans and their families to see Nazi inscriptions near those who gave their

lives for this nation...That's why the VA will initiate the process required to replace these POW headstones."¹

I could not help but wonder, what must African-Americans feel when they hear such a story at the same time that our federal government was protesting the removal of Confederate statues and our President defended the Confederate flag?² What can they think other than that their pain and suffering is of no consequence to our country?

Why should we as Jews care about racial inequality and institutionalized racism? We should care not only because many in our own community are very directly affected by it on a daily basis, but we should also care because no matter where our ancestors came from, Jews understand what it means to live under systems of oppression, and we understand that in a place where one group is singled out for prejudice and persecution, and no one speaks up, and no one defends them, then there will be others who will soon be targeted as well.

In 1963, when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his letter from the Birmingham jail: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." He wrote these words 18 years after the Holocaust had ended, and we understood exactly what he meant, and knew it to be painfully true.

It is not by coincidence that racism and anti-Semitism have both been on the rise these last few years. These evils feed on the same poisons, fear of the stranger, demonization of those who are different, and scapegoating stereotypes. There is a reason why we have been seeing more and more swastikas along side Confederate flags, and neo-Nazis marching with Klansmen. For many white supremacists the only difference between Blacks and Jews is that it is not as easy for them to figure out who is a Jew.

It should scare us all that in the last few years there have been more and more candidates on the ballot who subscribe to white supremacy and fringe conspiracy theories. For those people, America is a white Christian country, and the rest of us are seen at best as guests, or at worst, treasonous intruders in their country.

Not until we as a country finally deal with our original sin of slavery, and the way it still exists as institutionalized racism, will we really be able to deal with any other manifestation of bigotry or bias in our society.

In many of the cities where there have been acts of violence during the Black Lives Matters protests, we have come to learn that most of those who have instigated the chaos, those who come bearing arms,

¹ <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/06/01/nazi-headstones-will-be-removed-from-us-veterans-cemeteries-va-leaders-say/>

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-confederate/trump-says-confederate-flag-proud-symbol-of-u-s-south-idUSKCN24K0I0>

shooting people, or engaging in violence, have come from extremist groups who espouse white supremacy.

Those who go into these spaces and express racist beliefs and engage in terrorist behavior are a threat not only to the African-American community, but to us, and to every religious and ethnic minority.

And the same is true when we see anti-Semitism. Those who attacked our synagogue in 1999, the men who shot up the Tree of Life synagogue, and the Chabad in Poway, their hatred is not reserved for Jews alone. It is directed towards everyone who is different than them.

Abe Foxman, the long time Director of the Anti-Defamation League wrote an op-ed on September 11, that was meant to sound the alarm bells for what is happening in our country right now. His words were reminiscent to me of Rev. King's teachings when Foxman wrote:

"When our democracy is weakened, and when nativism is stoked, the rights of Jews and other minorities will be diminished too. It may not happen overnight, but it will happen, and Jews know this well from bitter experience."³

Before our very eyes we are seeing racism metastasize into xenophobic terrorism in our streets and throughout our political system. If we do not deal with the virulent spread and mainstreaming of white supremacy in this country NOW then we will be doomed to relive some of the darker times in both American and Jewish history.

The American journalist, Bari Weiss wrote that "Jewish history is more than a remembrance of things past; it's a moral manual. It's a lighthouse. It's a compass. If our ancestors could find their way when they were buffeted in ways we can only imagine, so can we."⁴

As we pray, study and fast together through the next 24 hours, we will offer words of atonement for our collective sins as a community. We atone in the collective because we understand that not only are we responsible for what we do as individuals and as a community, but we are also responsible for what we don't do. To be silent right now, to stand on the sidelines and ignore what we see, is to be complicit. It is not enough anymore to simply not to be a racist, we must all actively work to be anti-racist, not just within ourselves, but within our institutions and society at large.

There is an old Hasidic story about a man who had been wandering in the forest for several days, not knowing the way out. When he suddenly saw another man walking towards him, he was filled with joy. "Now I shall find my way out," he said to himself. When they met, he said, "I've lost my way and have been wandering in this forest for several days. Can you help me?" The other man replied, "I, too, am

³ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/american-jewrys-fateful-choice/>

⁴ https://www.timesofisrael.com/former-nyt-writer-bari-weiss-jewish-values-are-bigger-than-any-fancy-title/?utm_source=The+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=daily-edition-2020-07-24&utm_medium=email

lost and have also been wandering here for several days. Do not take the path I've been on, for that will lead you astray. Let us look for a new way out, together.”⁵

The problem of racism, anti-semitism, religious bigotry, is like that dark dense forest, with no clear path out. But just like the two men in the story, our chances of finding a way out into the light are greater if we are willing to learn from where others have been, and instead of us wandering by ourselves, we try to find a new way out, together.

Remember that game I told you that my siblings and I used to play, the one called “Who had it worse?”. Well something wonderful has happened since we stopped playing it. Some of our emotional scabs have begun to heal, and the four of us have grown closer together. It's not that we stopped telling stories of our childhood, but the stories started to be replaced with other ones, happier memories, of us playing together, being stupid together, of being a family. When we stopped feeling all alone in our pain, and were able to truly come together in understanding and respect, we were able to find a way out of our forest.

I pray that in the year 5781 our country will be able to see, hear, and begin to understand the many painful stories that live side by side in America, and learn to respect and understand how our nation's past continues to shape and affect who we all are, both in terms of privilege and prejudice, and that we find our way out of the darkness together so that we might finally become a more perfect union.

Ken yehi ratzon, may this be God's will.

⁵ <http://www.rabbilevin.net/lost-in-the-forest/>