

Truth, Hope, Mercy and Justice

אמת, תקווה, רחמים וצדק

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Yom Kippur, Wednesday, October 5, 2022

Memory is a sacred thing in Judaism. We institutionalize the honoring of memory into the Jewish calendar not only our communal memory through the holidays, but our personal memories as well. When we have lost a loved one we are supposed to light a candle for them and say the Kaddish, not only on their yertzeit, the anniversary of their death, but also at Yizkor services, on Yom Kippur, and on the last day of Sukkot, on the last day of Passover and on Shavuot. And in addition to that, it is traditional to visit the graves of loved ones between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Not to mention that at the end of every morning service and every evening service we conclude our prayers by saying the Kaddish. And since WWII we say Kaddish not only for our own loved ones, but for all those who had no one left to say Kaddish for them, because we want to ensure that the memory of the 6 million is not forgotten.

When a Jewish community is created, the first thing to be established is a cemetery. Before we build a school or a synagogue, we have an obligation to take care of our dead. Because how can we properly deal with the present or the future, if we have not properly honored the past?

We have survived these many thousands of years *because* we have institutionalized memory through prayer and ritual, and by weaving it into our holy-days and our every-days.

There's a reason why we put names on headstones, memorial boards and monuments. It is human to want something tangible to remind the world that someone who mattered to us once lived. We want to make sure that their memory will last beyond the lifetime of just those who loved them.

We do this not only for individuals, but for our larger community as well. It is why wherever there is a significant Jewish population we erect Holocaust memorials. It is why it was so important for our community here in Sacramento when a library at a school in Natomas was named after our member, Bernie Marks, z"l, who was a survivor of Auschwitz. It is a way for us to keep their stories alive.

Last May I travelled to the American south with members of our congregation on a Civil Rights trip. The purpose of the trip was not only to better understand the racial history of our country, but to also understand how that history continues to affect our present day reality.

A particularly emotional part of the trip was the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, more commonly referred to as the National Lynching Memorial. It is in Montgomery Alabama, the former capitol of the Confederacy.

It was an overwhelming experience. As we quietly walked up a hill past statues and quotes etched in stone we began to walk into a concrete forest of what felt like headstones hanging from stone trees. At the top of each stone monument was the name of a different county in the United States where a racial terror lynching had occurred. And below the the name of the county and state were the names of the people who had been murdered, and the date that it had happened. We walked and read, stone after stone, after stone. Some stones had one or two names on them. But so many had groups of names, families murdered at the same time. And then there were others where entire communities were wiped out over a period of one or two days. For many, if not most, of those people, those stones are the only things that mark not only their death, but the fact that they existed at all.

It was an emotionally and psychologically overwhelming experience that reminded me of a Holocaust memorial I had visited in Prague. On the interior walls of the Pinkas synagogue in the Jewish quarter are the names of the Jews of the Czech Republic who were murdered by the Nazis. The names are recorded under the names of the cities they lived in. And on either side of the Holy Ark are the names of the Concentration Camps where so many of those Jews were murdered.

It was also reminiscent to me of the *stolpersteines*, or stumbling stones, that are found in cities throughout Europe. Small brass stones embedded in the street in front of the last known residence of Jews before they were taken by the Nazis. On each stone is the name of the person who lived there, the year of their birth, the year they were deported and to which concentration camp, and if known, the date of their death. In front of some homes are one or two *stolpersteines*, and in front of others there might be as many as twenty. Like the Lynching Memorial, the *stolpersteines* are the closest thing to a headstone that many of those who were murdered will ever have.

Somehow by linking the names to the places where they had lived, makes each person more real. They become part of not only a community, or a county, but of something bigger. We begin to see a pattern, not just of individual lives that have been taken, we begin to see there was also no safe place for them to go, that the entire country was unsafe. And through that we come to understand that the entire country is responsible for each and every murder.

As I walked through the lynching memorial, I was struck by how in all of these different cities and states where these terrorist attacks had occurred, because that is what a lynching is, it is an attack that is meant to cause terror in a larger population, there are almost no memorials, no reminders of the past, let alone acknowledgement of the current state of race relations in those communities, or in this country today.

Between 1877 and 1950 more than 4,400 African American men, women, and children were hanged, burned alive, shot, drowned or beaten to death by white mobs. Millions fled the South as refugees from racial terror. And yet, until just a few years ago, there was no national memorial acknowledging the victims of racial terror lynchings in our country.¹

As Jews we understand the importance of memory. This is why throughout the U.S. we have erected museums and memorials to those who were murdered in the Holocaust. These museums are not meant to simply remind us of a horrible past, but to teach us, *and others*, how to behave differently in the present. What if we as Americans were to demand the same thing for racial atrocities that were done in our country?

As I went through the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, I could not help but wonder how different would the United States be if we were to actually face up to our past, to confront it, to take responsibility for it, and then to try to repair it and ultimately, to actively work to change the trajectory that our nation is on. In other words, imagine our country engaging in a national teshuva process, of real repentance and repair.

I can not help but wonder what would have happened if we had ever been willing to face the horror of the genocide of indigenous Americans or the atrocities of slavery, would there have been the imprisonment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during WWII? Would we have had redlining and segregation

¹ <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org>

and Jim Crow? Would we still have a school to prison pipeline? Would we be so complacent at how refugees on our southern border are being treated today?

Wouldn't all of our citizens benefit if we engaged in a national teshuva, if we actually acknowledged and wrestled with our past? Wouldn't all minorities, including Jews, feel a little bit safer?

Imagine, if we as a nation engaged in the type of teshuva that we are called upon to do as Jews on Yom Kippur. Imagine what healing there could be if we stood together as a larger American community, willing to name our communal sins, and to change our ways, to try to make teshuva through some sort of restitution to those who have been hurt by our governments actions, the way that Germany has tried to do with Holocaust survivors?

We can't have racial reconciliation in this country until we are first honest with ourselves about our history. We have to be willing to sit in our discomfort in order for real change to occur. We must be willing to acknowledge that there is such a thing as white privilege and that not everyone is treated equally in the eyes of the law, or the eyes of our schools, or in the eyes of our neighbors. We must be willing to learn from our past if we ever want to change our future.

One of the things I love about the Tanach, the Jewish Bible, is that it does not whitewash Jewish history. It shows us who our ancestors were, for good and for bad. And let me tell you, there is a lot that makes me uncomfortable and upset in our Bible. But by being willing to confront the uglier parts of our history, we are able to, God willing, learn and grow as individuals and as a people from our past misdeeds.

As Jews we understand how 2000 years of exile, persecution, and bigotry was institutionalized into many religions as well as western culture, and how it has affected who we are as a religion, as a people and as individuals. So why would we think that it is any different for African Americans who have suffered under 500 years of institutionalized racism in our country? We of all people understand that silence in the face of injustice is akin to consent.

It is as Rabbi Judah Loew, the 16th century Maharal of Prague wrote, "While a person may be individually pious, such good will pales in the face of the sin of not protesting against an emerging communal evil. Not only will such piety not avert

the impending evil, but such a pious person will be accountable for having been able to prevent it and not doing so.”²

Today, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgement, we are held accountable as individuals, and as a community, on whether or not we tried to prevent injustice, or whether we chose to do nothing.

A great legal scholar, civil rights activist, and fellow member of our congregation, Brian Landsberg wrote in the Preface of his book “Free at Last to Vote” that “History informs our understanding of the present as well as the past.” He cautions us by saying “it is important to tell this story. We are in the midst of a struggle for control of memory.”

Because that is what history is, it is our collective memory. And memory is what informs our current choices.

C.S. Pacat, an Australian author similarly cautioned us by saying: “When the past is forgotten, then it can return. Only those who remember have the chance to stave it off. For the dark is never truly gone; it only waits for the world to forget, so that it may rise again.”

Around the corner from the Lynching Memorial in Montgomery is the The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. As I sat outside the museum, processing what I had seen and learned, I became focused on the words that had been carved in stone on the outer walls: Truth, Hope, Mercy and Justice.

As I sat there staring at those words, I could not help but wonder why they chose them, as well as to think about the importance those particular words have in Judaism.

Truth – *Emet*

Hope – *Tikvah*

Mercy – *Rachamim*

Justice – *Tzedek*

What should we learn by studying the past?

Emet – Truth

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/no-neutrality-silence-is-assent/>

What can we acquire when we better understand history?

Tikvah – Hope

What should we have more of when we take the time to learn the history of not just one group of people, but of many?

Rachamim – Mercy

And what should incorporating the lessons of history into our lives make us want to work for in the present?

Tzedek – Justice

And to those words I on the wall I would have added one more imperative.

Zachor – Remember

Because if we fail to remember our past, then truth, hope, mercy and justice can not truly exist. And then God help us all.