

A Country on Fire

A sermon on racial injustice (Print Version)

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Rabbi Paul Kipnes writes:

*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 to act - way past time for debate¹*

Life is hard right now. Reading or watching the news is sad and infuriating and overwhelming. And ignoring it is choosing to feed into the system that created the

¹ A Psalm for Cities on Fire, By Rabbi Paul Kipnes

problem. And with everything going on - I can't help but think about our world as a 'birah doleket' - a palace in flames.

Our rabbis tell us Abraham is chosen by God because while traveling from place to place, when he saw a birah doleket - a Palace in Flames, Abraham said, 'Is it possible that the world lacks a caretaker?' the Blessed Holy One looked out and said to him, 'I am the Sovereign of the Universe.' Following which, the Holy One said 'Lech Lecha,' 'Go forth... and be a blessing.'²

For noticing and asking about the burning palace, Abraham merits becoming the father of nations. Why? One way our tradition understands this text is that when Abram saw the world engulfed in flames he didn't turn away. On the contrary, he longs to help, to put out the fire. Rabbi Lester Bronstein asks though, "Doesn't anyone else see it?" wondering why Abraham's comments were so unique. Rabbi Bronstein offers the possible answers of:

Of course they do, but no one seems to notice that it might be a problem. Or, they all notice, but assume that this tragic state is the way of the world, and they walk on. What can I do? Or – and this is the most insidious possibility - they like it this way. They benefit from the distraction, the chaos, the suffering of others that provides convenient cover. They know full well that the status quo of the world perpetuates innumerable injustices in their backyard, but it works for them, and so they convince themselves that nothing is amiss. Or that things are amiss, but the alternative might be worse, so they try to stay under the radar. Abraham, however, stops. He knows something is wrong. He cannot allow himself not to get involved.³

Our world is a palace on fire - and we all see it. So the question becomes - how do we respond?

As Jews, we must look at the world around us and see the truth - the flames, the brokenness, the work that needs to be done. When it comes to the issue of race in America, we need to admit that for many, our world, our country, our system is broken. We are watching it burn. We must follow Abraham's lead and decide to not look away.

² Genesis Rabbah 39:1

³ https://betamshalom.org/sites/default/files/site_pdfs/rosh_hashanah_5774_2013.pdf

The Religious Action Center (RAC), our movement's lobbying arm, notes: "We live in a moment when the blood of our brothers and sisters of color cries out from the ground, from the streets, prisons, schools and hospitals of America, and we cannot ignore the urgency of their voices, or our own roles as allies, perpetrators and complicit bystanders in on-going racial injustice in our country."⁴

In their Resolution on the Study and Development of Reparations for Slavery and Systemic Racism in the U.S., the RAC also notes,⁵

Systemic racial oppression in the United States began four hundred years ago with the institution of slavery. ... After the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that abolished slavery in the U.S., systemic oppression, violence, and racial discrimination against Black Americans continued. Jim Crow laws, lynchings, policies such as "separate but equal," restricted access to the ballot box for Black Americans, an unjust criminal justice system have led to drastically higher incarceration rates of Black men, redlining, and denied economic, educational and social opportunities for Black Americans, among a litany of injustices persisted through the generations. These many forms of violence and discrimination have generated ongoing generational and historic trauma for Black Americans. Today, racial inequity is present in virtually every aspect of American life: Seventy-three percent of white households own their homes, compared to only 43 percent of Black households. Black students are expelled from school at disproportionately high rates, and the 2013 total college enrollment rate for white students was 42 percent, while rates for their Black peers was only 34 percent. The employment rate for Black men has been 11 to 15 percentage points lower than that for whites in every month since January 2000. Black women experience maternal deaths at three to four times that of white women. Black infants are more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday compared to white babies. Black Americans are incarcerated at a rate 5.1 times higher than that of whites Americans.

I know it is hard to believe that our democratic ideal America allows such inequalities... but we have ample evidence this is the case. By so many Jewish values, this is

⁴ Intro from RAC's "2015 High Holy Day Sermon Support on Racial Justice"

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<https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/resolution-study-and-development-reparations-slavery-and-systemic-racism>

unacceptable. In the Torah we are taught the lesson – *mishpat echad yihiyeh lachem*⁶ - there should be one law for all people. That means our society should treat everyone equally, that one rule be applied the same way to all people, with one, equal, method of enforcement. That would require this nation to treat everyone the same regardless of their race, wealth, or any other feature.

This, we know, is not how laws, policing, or imprisonment actually works in America.⁷ We do not have equal opportunities for success; we do not provide equitable public education for people of all status. We do not have equal access to the ballot box, and we do not have the same health and wellness resources. We have a flawed criminal justice system, horrendous and clearly unbalanced treatment of black men by our police, our courts and our prison systems.⁸

This may be hard to acknowledge. I know- the inclination is to protect the system. To write off bad behavior as the exception and not the norm - but the exceptions are far too many and our concern must be to stop this behavior from ever occurring.

And I know we are uncomfortable with protests and sometimes even appalled by riots, but Martin Luther King Jr taught “The riot is the language of the unheard.”⁹ So ask yourselves - what isn’t America hearing? What have we refused to hear? From the iconic peaceful march of Martin Luther King with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel by his side, which was met with police beating the marchers, police dogs brutalizing them, and water hoses on full force. What about even peacefully taking a knee, like Colin Kaepernick, a truly peaceful protest that many Americans refused to accept with such anger that it led to him being blackballed and unable to play football any more. What about all the reactions to the killing of Trayvon Martin and the fact that nothing has changed.

And consider that if after trying every possible legitimate and peaceful way of speaking out - people are still unheard, still ignored, still treated as inconsequential - to riot becomes all they can do to get our nation’s attention - as the language of the unheard - then how do we view it? Do we start to listen?

⁶ Lev. 24:22a

⁷ <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>

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https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/03/us/minneapolis-police-use-of-force.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage&fbclid=IwAR0fxVrQrY_6GNwXWv8Nm5yb0P9G-MipEpZGEsjNrijJGxzdzjTzoFv_AQM

⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/matthew-desmond-riots/552542/>

Let's be crystal clear here - looting and breaking laws are not acceptable - and I do not condone or encourage it. And I believe most protesters want this to remain a peaceful expression of their pain and rage. Still, there is real rage there. So I want us all to try and understand some of the reasons behind the rioting we're seeing. And that may sound unfathomable to many of you, because we all live by a social contract with both explicit and implicit rules that govern the behavior of rational people. So we see people acting out, breaking this contract and we think - they must be irrational.

But what if there is an underlying current even stronger than our national social contract? According to philosopher Charles Mills our system isn't failing because of a few bad apples. "It is not the case that we have a political system that was perfectly conceived and unfortunately imperfectly applied." Rather, Mills argues that "there exists a 'racial contract' that is even more fundamental to Western society than the social contract. This racial contract determines in the first place who counts as full moral and political persons." It establishes who is treated as fully human. And America's problem today is that "we continue to believe in the myths that social contract theory tells us - that everyone is equal, that all will be treated the same before the law..." However, "the racial contract informs the very structure of our political systems, and lays the basis for the continuing racial oppression of non-whites."¹⁰

Yes - protests are hard and it's awful and unacceptable when with riots and looting people are breaking down law and order. But let's be clear - law and order is already broken when those who are charged with enforcing the law are not abiding by it themselves. That is a recipe for lawlessness. And patriotism to me is about fulfilling the promise of America—liberty and justice for all.

People who are treated as less than - know it, feel it, and - eventually - tire of it. Trevor Noah, host of The Daily Show, says "Some members of the society, namely black American people, watch time and time again how ... (society fails them) ... try to imagine how it must feel for black Americans when they watch themselves being looted every single day. Because that's fundamentally what's happening in America. Police in America are looting black bodies. I know someone might think that's an extreme phrase, but it's not. Because here's the thing I think a lot of people don't realize: George Floyd died. That is part of the reason the story became so big, is because he died. But how many George Floyds are there who don't die? How many men are having knees put on their necks?... imagine if you were them, watching that (social) contract be ripped up every single day. Ask yourself how you'd feel."

¹⁰ Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy <https://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/#SH4b>

So - I asked myself. And now I'm asking you - if Jews were shown over and over again, decade after decade, living and being made to feel that our lives didn't count as much as others and that our voices, even when peaceful, were inappropriate, how would you react?

Our humanity should compel us to care about this happening to others. We shouldn't need to apply it to our story in order to feel the gravity of this. Still - I worry that the magnitude of the problem is such that it is hard to wrap our brains around it. So for a moment - let's pretend this was our Jewish reality here in America.

If you had to worry that every time you went out in this country - for a run, or went to take out your wallet, or decided to go bird watching, or wore a hooded sweater, or got stopped for a traffic violation - there was a chance you would end up dead... how long would you live like that?

What about your children? If you saw over and over again your children's lives being stolen, with no real justice to speak of, how long would you remain silent? If after every tragic murder is unexplicably explained away by the courts and then one day you watched a video of a calm and collected police officer slowly choking an unarmed Jewish man to death in public, while three other officers enabled this murder - how loud would you scream with rage?

No - this is not happening to us, but it could be.

And we, as Jews and as human beings have a responsibility to stand up, to speak out and to demand that America hears the message that George Floyd's murder is unacceptable.

As was the murder of Amandla Stenberg, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner and so many more unarmed people of color whose names I regrettably don't know, because no one caught it on camera, or because the news simply didn't report it widely, because it just seemed unremarkable that another human being's life was taken.

Well, the language of the unheard has spoken and now we're listening - now we hear. This shouldn't be about politics. This should be about our shared humanity. It's time we all look inside ourselves, address any latent racist tendencies in our own hearts and figure out a way to truly see all human beings as created in God's image - to view all life as equally sacred.

We also need to reach out beyond ourselves if we really hope to make a difference. And so, I share with you all the advice of the CCAR, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, who are imploring all our congregants to join in demonstrating solidarity with Black Americans - by:

Reaching out to African-American friends who are in pain, frightened, or angry
Offering support and demonstrating our enduring presence;
Frequenting Black-owned businesses; Supporting community efforts and organizations that work to empower African-Americans; Learning how to be an anti-racist and joining efforts to change policies that perpetuate systemic racism.

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This week, I tried to take these lessons to heart, and I reached out to local colleagues who can help me better understand what it's like to be black in America. I had the honor of being connected to Pastor John Walker and Pastor Kelvin Lumpkin whom I've invited to speak to us next Shabbat. So please tune in next week to hear their perspective and insights- as this conversation is just beginning.

I'm also going to be posting suggested reading and resources on our website - visit our Social Action and Justice page for more details.

Call me, email me, schedule an appointment and let me know - if you want to engage further about anything I've said. And while I'd be excited to know if you want to help our community to get more involved with this important justice work, I'm also here to engage with anyone who disagrees with something I've said. I know this is a painful message and we might not agree completely on everything - but no matter where you might be on this issue - everyone can see that our country is burning and I know no one wants that at all.

We live in a *birah doleket* - there is so much beauty in our nation but it is also plagued by pain. It's time we see the flames engulfing our country, and recognize we can and must do something to change our society - and ensure that we change our societal contract, to include people of color as full - appreciated - protected - valuable - participants in society.

Valuing their lives as much as we do our own.

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<https://www.ccarnet.org/central-conference-of-american-rabbis-statement-on-racist-killings/?fbclid=IwAR1OERyI5MA5YByXQ890UcUQe0Uwihbu7nxgPwwAb11w5wvO9BclldT8M4M>

Shabbat shalom.