

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about John Lewis and how protest was a mode of living - compelling and transformative. But on Yom Kippur I would say that protest itself is really the tip of an iceberg, supported by a deeper and broader experience of an ongoing willingness to give up something ourselves, and **be transformed**.

Here is an example from the past few weeks.

There was a story in the Times, a profile of a 16 year old Black young woman named Daria Allen who is from Portland. After the deaths of Breanna Taylor and George Floyd, and getting her own driver's license, she found herself consumed by questions about what could happen to her, to her grandmother she lives with, or her future children. After a summer job dried up, the protests for Black lives in Portland became the central focus of her life, taking the place of the passions and activities she formerly had as a high school student. In her own words, she says:

“For me, being a young Black woman, I’m just focused on my life. That’s really why I’m out here,” she said. “I am just a Black girl trying to live.”

For this young woman, protesting is **not really even a choice** of weighing one option against another or overcoming inertia.

Referring to the protests, she said, “I don’t even feel like I have to.” “I just *do* have to.”

I read this story as a white, Jewish man, who never had to worry about my life. And yet, I see in this story a way of knowing and being that I aspire to - a sense of the immediacy and urgency of action, the call to personal change, as well as the call to collective action and change.

The Haftarah from this morning expresses this vision of transformation on a collective scale. Isaiah and the people of his time were on the cusp of a revolutionary moment - the return of exiles from Babylonia to Jerusalem, where they could rebuild their Temple, and experience a spiritual and moral rebirth. Isaiah anticipates that the people of his time will revive their piety and their rituals, but of course that’s not the substance of their rebirth. Instead, it is to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, take the homeless into their own homes, to break the yoke of oppression. And lest the people come to believe that the suffering of the other is not their own, he warns them, “Do not ignore your own flesh,” the Other is You.

At first glance, such a message may seem more of a reminder of what he have forgotten, rather than a revolution of thought. But Isaiah shows the people how radical it is - to look to that “Other” as yourself - by imagining the world transformed. Light will break forth like the dawn and never diminish; we will be like an ever flowing well whose source shows no signs of diminishing; bridges are constructed and ruins are rebuilt.

But the ultimate sign of revolutionary transformation is the relationship between God and humanity. In our stories on Rosh Hashanah, God called to Abraham, and Abraham said, “Hineni,” here I am. But for Isaiah, it’s the opposite. At the point when we are able to join together in the pursuit of justice of those who are exploited, abused, and oppressed, it is WE

who command God's attention, not the other way around. Isaiah says that, when that happens, we call out, God responds, "Hineni," Here I am, ready to serve you.

My question in response to both this story of Daria Allen and the Haftara is the same - how do we begin this collective transformation through justice, and how do we think of it?

In his book, How to be an Anti-Racist, the scholar Ibram X. Kendi quotes the towering Black poet Audre Lorde, from an essay she published 40 years ago. She says, "We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing, and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it; if that is not possible, and if it is dominant we copy it; or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have NO PATTERN for relating across our human differences as equals."

The point of Kendi's book is that there is another way that goes against against the grain of our society, that neither destroys nor ignores, assimilates nor obliterates. It is what he calls anti-racism, and it is radical.

It is radical in that it forces us to uproot the destructive patterns of thought and action that maintain the status quo.

- in that it demands a complete transformation of our very consciousness about ourselves and each other.

- in that it demands an almost total re-prioritization of how we choose to act and direct our lives.

In Jewish terms, anti-racism is something the great Rabbi Tarfon would have understood: we most probably won't fully realize the task, but it is still an urgent and enduring obligation.

I believe that for Jews, to be part of the transformation of anti-racism entails a fundamental reexamination of the story we tell about ourselves. I'm not pretending this is easy to do. One of the unconscious reasons I became a rabbi was so that I could live the modern Jewish story more fully in all of its grandeur, creativity, pathos and depth. For me, it is a story of being part of the oppressed and triumphing, through unseen strength, creativity, and the resources of a transcendent tradition. It is a deeply wise and righteous story.

But the public story of American Judaism has been predicated on the assumption that we are mostly the same - Ashkenazi and White. (And who is "we?") People of Sephardi origin, people of color, people who are Queer, converts, intermarried partners - have been welcomed to be part of that story, but only if they mostly "blend in" into our existing community and historic norms. Kendi would call this assimilationist, and it fundamentally ignores or suppresses the differences that make us human while elevating the historically imposed norms of whiteness, gender and sexuality. And if we ignore or suppress the humanity WITHIN our own community, our own people, we are probably not fully seeing the humanity and range of experience OUTSIDE our community, even with people whom we see as historic allies, partners and friends.

But now we are living in what I would call a prophetic moment - one that exposes the fundamental injustice of our society - a society we have both challenged AND embraced - and it's a moment that spurs us to structural change. And whether or not we feel this impulse, the change will happen anyway. As a country, we are expected to be majority POC by 2048, and demographers expect to see a shift in the Jewish community as well. We are already experiencing this change. Many of us may be white, but a number of us who have been regulars in the community for a long time are People of Color. And I know that among those of us who *are* white, many of us have people of color in our families - as children, children-in-law, our grandchildren, our extended family.

I believe that our task now is to investigate how we see ourselves or don't see everyone in our community; how we see or don't see people of color; how we may give tacit approval to expressions of racism so ingrained into the status quo we may not even know they exist; and then to change ourselves, especially if we do not see ourselves as needing to change. Because if we commit to this kind of deep change, we will make our community a home - not just a guest house - for anyone who walks in our door. And that approaches the idea of what Isaiah envisioned, that our home be a house of prayer for all people.

Though it may feel new to some of us, this kind of transformative change has its roots at the heart of teshuvah, this turning we do to restore our sense of moral and spiritual integrity. Maimonides, in his Laws of Teshuva, radicalizes the notion of teshuvah by recasting it from being a mode of action into a **wholesale transformation of consciousness**. In a situation of conflict, he says, we should confess, make amends, and entreat the other person. This is in line with earlier Talmud tradition. Then, says Maimonides, we resolve in our hearts, not only to act, but even to **think and feel differently**. We soften ourselves so that we are capable of greater change in the future. And IF we pursue teshuvah with this total commitment of being, we see at some point how we've changed. We can look back at ourselves and say, "**I am another person**," different from who we were in the past. In this way, Teshuvah fundamentally **alters who we are**.

There are other features of teshuvah that **point the way to our becoming an anti-racist community**. What is true for an individual is true for a community. And what is true for individuals and a community is true for a society. Living in concentric circles of responsibility, the anti-Racism work we do individually, in small groups and community meetings ripples out and changes the fragile balance we live with.

Also, while spiritual teshuvah may be private, teshuvah between other people must be PUBLIC. Without that public declaration of our past missteps and future change, says Maimonides, our teshuvah will never be complete. That means, when it comes to anti-Racism work, we have to EXPRESS HOW we are accountable for our past actions, and SHOW how we are going to change.

What might we have to give up in our own collective, anti-Racist teshuvah, and how do we SHOW our intention to participate in ongoing change?

I'm most comfortable saying that we'll figure out those answers together. But Rabbi Mira Rivera, a friend and colleague who was born in the Philippines and who leads organizing for Jews of color in NYC, suggested to me how we may think of both the costs of change as well as the path forward. She observes that in the past, when confronted by injustice, Jewish communities have assumed that we can **command a leadership stance** and **fix the problem**. After all, we are a tradition built on the words - tzedek tzedek tirdof - let us pursue injustice and bring shalom. And we have the resources to make that change happen.

But Rabbi Mira pointed out that now is time for a **new attitude**. We must always pursue justice. But instead of commanding the position of leading, we as a community should instead **show up to listen, and be led by Jews of color and people of color who take on moral imperatives through their own experiences**. In that way, we transform ourselves as a community from being the self-appointed leaders of the big tent, into allies willing to be part of the ongoing re-weaving in a new way.

I would add something else, I have always believed we should work to be a community that joyfully and lovingly embraces the particularity of being Jewish - Hebrew, tzedakah, deep and rigorous study, traditional observance - and while we work hard at being Jewish, we welcome anyone who wants to be a part of that work with us. I still think we should do this.

But with **an important difference**. I would like each person who interacts with our community to **feel as if they are home**. And in my home, I want you to feel like you can bring the totality of who you are - what you've learned, who you love, what you fear, struggle with and hope for. And that I expect that "who you are" will be different for each of us, and it will be different if we are Black, brown, or white. **Our work, as a community, is to make that sense of being at home possible**. At root, it means being willing to challenge ourselves, and through being challenged, to change in deeply meaningful ways.

We are not starting from scratch. We have a **Tikkun Olam committee, and an anti-racism working group**, that has been working together for years to spark meaningful conversations and reflections in our community. And two recent events - one with the Southern Policy Law Center and another just before Rosh Hashanah featuring Eric Ward, a national expert on anti-Semitism and racism - point out how much people in our community want to pursue this change - internally and externally. Both of these presentations drove home the dual concept that, yes, as Jews, we have a seat at the table in this anti-racist moment because of our collective history of anti-Semitism; but because of that history, we also have a compelling reason to join with and follow the lead of Black activists whose main goal is to end White supremacy and protect their communities and our societies from violence.

And to make it a true, and thorough endeavor to transform our community, **we need everyone** - of all backgrounds and points of view to participate. Check your emails, and action alerts. Come to meetings, events and public conversations and ask questions. Put us in touch with people of color who you think might be interested in developing a relationship with us. Because to make our community into a home for all is not really a choice.

Echoing the words of the young woman who found herself absorbed in the protests in Portland, we don't do it because we FEEL we have to. We just DO have to, to become a morally righteous and courageous Jewish community in this transformative time.