

Creation Through *Teshuvah*: Reckoning with the Sins of Slavery & Racism

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Last week, we hurtled backward in time and space before Creation, when all that was, was God. Before the darkness of the cosmos, before light was called forth, before the earth was formed, the power of *teshuvah* flourished. “Great is *teshuvah*,” the Rabbis teach, “because it existed before Creation.”¹

Teshuvah is primordial in origin—which means it’s interwoven into everything. You and I are born with the capacity for *teshuvah*, what we inexactly translate as “repentance”. As Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook describes: “*Teshuvah* is, in essence, an effort to return to our original status, to the source of life in its fullness, without limitation.”² *Teshuvah* is a gift and an obligation. It’s a gift to know that we have the path of transformation always open to us. It’s an obligation to walk that path, to look within, see where we failed, confess aloud, express remorse, and make actual changes in our behavior. We gather as a community on Yom Kippur to walk this path together, to make amends even if we can’t fully rectify the damage we’ve caused.

In this spirit, I stand before you on the path of *teshuvah*, turning away from my participation in and benefit from the unjust, untenable, and torturous systems of racism and white supremacy upon which the country I love, the country I call home, upon which America has been built. God knows, this particular path of *teshuvah* is not easy to walk or talk about. However, I commit to walking this path, with all its challenges and with all my fumbling, for the rest of my life. While racism is insidious in all its forms, today I will focus on the unique history of, and therefore my unique responsibility to, African Americans.

I began my journey of *teshuvah* as a pilgrim, traveling to sacred ground to return transformed. This summer I was one of 29 members of Temple Beth Am on a Civil Rights pilgrimage to the Deep South. The land we traversed was sacred because blood had been shed there in my name and in the name of everyone whose skin looks like mine. As we traveled by bus, and as the verdant yet desolate landscape passed below my window, my thoughts turned to that first generation after Creation. We were barely out of the Garden of Eden when Cain murdered his brother Abel. God, horrified, exclaimed: “*Meh aseetah?* What have you done? Your brother’s blood cries to Me from the earth!”³ Driving on that bus in the South I realized that all these generations later, here on American soil, nothing has changed. The blood of millions kidnapped in chains, tortured, beaten, brutalized, lynched, incarcerated and senselessly shot down, the blood of all those individual, precious, unique human lives, all their blood cries to us from earth.

There was one place on our trip that left an indelible impression on all of us, The Legacy Museum and the National Memorial to Peace and Justice, in Montgomery, Alabama. Through documents, artifacts, and innovative exhibits, the Legacy Museum explores in excruciating detail how slavery back then evolved into mass incarceration today. A mile away is the National Memorial, where upon entering an open-sided pavilion, we faced row after row of metal columns, six feet long, torso-shaped, inscribed with the names,

¹Genesis Rabbah 1:4

² Ben Zion Bokser, trans., *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence*

³ Genesis 4:10

dates and counties of thousands upon thousands of people who were lynched. Along the walls, plaques identify the victims and the circumstances of their death, such as the black woman who told white boys to stop throwing rocks at her, or the black man who expected his white customer to pay him for his services, or the white man, a minister, who married an inter-racial couple, or black man after black man after black man who dared to speak to white women. Walking through, “the pavilion floor begins to incline downward; and the monuments are presented in suspension, . . . gradually lifting off the ground, higher and higher . . . [until it feels like you’re in] a forest of hanging bodies.”⁴ And you stand beneath them, appalled, breathless, a complicit onlooker.

Taken together, the museum and memorial are, in my opinion, national treasures. They were built by the Equal Justice Initiative an advocacy organization founded by Bryan Stevenson, the author, public-interest lawyer and criminal justice activist.

Bryan Stevenson is also a modern-day prophet.

The prophets of the Hebrew Bible felt God’s pathos and love for human beings, and often stood on the margins of society looking in. From this perspective, they saw their peers with searing honesty. They revealed the hypocrisy of common citizens and highlighted how so-called good people espoused one set of values and acted on another. As Isaiah bluntly points out in today’s Haftarah portion—our ancestors’ self-righteous fasting was unacceptable to God because they did not lift up the oppressed, or release the enslaved, or give sustenance to the hungry, the homeless, the poor.

Like the prophet Isaiah, Stevenson sees our society through the eyes of those relegated to the margins, inmates of color unfairly locked away in our prison system. He sees good citizens in mainstream America ignoring the true legacy of slavery. “Most Americans,” Stevenson says, “would say that if they were alive during the 19th century, of course, they’d try to end slavery, would say that if they were alive in the ‘20s and ‘30s, they’d do whatever they can to stop lynching. Everybody would claim to be on the side of the civil rights marchers in wanting to end segregation.” Yet, Stevenson says, “I don’t think you can claim to have been an abolitionist or an anti-lynching crusader or a civil rights protester, if you’re currently living in a society where there’s evidence of horrific racial bias . . . and you do nothing.”⁵

Stevenson suggests racism is so pernicious in all realms of our society—criminal justice, education, housing, healthcare, the arts—because the story we tell ourselves is patently false. As a country, we’re not willing to reconcile ourselves to the brute reality of our nation’s history. He says, “. . . I think we’ve actually created a narrative that says [slavery and the lynchings] weren’t that bad and not only do we not need to recover from that, we don’t even need to be remorseful about that. There is no shame.”⁶

No shame. These words should land on us like a shofar’s blast, awakening us and shattering our self-perceptions. We have suppressed our shame over slavery, over Jim Crow, over mass incarcerations, over police brutality, for far too long. For those of us who benefit from these systems, that is, for those of us who are white, many of us have suppressed our shame because we are repelled by the agony that’s been wrought to our advantage. In the words of Ta Nehisi Coates “All our phrasing—*race relations*, *racial chasm*, *racial justice*, *racial profiling*, *white privilege*, even *white supremacy*—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral

⁴ *New York Times*, “A Memorial to the Lingering Horror of Lynching,” June 1, 2008

⁵ On The Media podcast, *The Worst Thing We’ve Ever Done*, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/on-the-media-2018-06-01/>

⁶ *Ibid*

experience; it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.”⁷ Most white Americans avert our eyes from the real terror that’s been inflicted on millions of people; we’re sickened to realize that we’re safe by virtue of our skin pigmentation. For some of us, if we’re honest with ourselves, we resist the truth because to accept it means we’ll need to shift the status quo and make substantial sacrifices. And for others, we’re paralyzed by the knowledge that the full damage caused by slavery and its consequences will never be rectified. Whatever the reasons, by sublimating our shame over slavery, our moral standing as a nation has been, and is, and will continue to be diminished, regardless of who sits in the Oval Office.

Like all prophetic pronouncements, this message is based in love. As Stevenson says, “We are all more than the worst thing we’ve ever done... We’re more than a slave society. We’re more than a lynching society. We’re more than a segregation society. But we cannot ignore that bad thing we did. There is redemption waiting. There’s recovery waiting. There’s reconciliation waiting. There’s something that feels more like justice than what we’ve experienced in America. There’s something better waiting for us, without this burden, this history of racial inequality holding us down. But we can’t get there through silence, by pretending that the history doesn’t exist. We’ve got to own up to it.”⁸

On this Yom Kippur, with all the other urgent issues in the world, I hear these words as a call to engage in serious *teshuvah* that is long overdue. We can set ourselves free from the past. We can live up to our highest ideals. We can create our nation and ourselves anew. It is long past time. We must return. We must make *teshuvah*.

Our tradition teaches that there are three levels on the path of *teshuvah*: *Selichah*, forgiveness; *m’chilah*, pardon; and *kapparah*, atonement.

We begin with *selichah*, by asking for forgiveness, and naming our sins aloud so that we know the breadth of our wrongdoing.

Al chet shechatanu l’fanecha...for the sin that we have committed...by not accurately naming our complicity in systems of injustice.

I suspect some of you may be uncomfortable with my use of the term “white supremacy”, and my assertion that white supremacy is a bedrock upon which our nation is built. I understand. When someone first suggested that I participate in systems of white supremacy I resisted the term—I acknowledged that I benefit from white privilege, but white supremacy? White supremacists marched in Charlottesville. White supremacists hate Jews and seek our annihilation. White supremacists are not me. However, I’ve come to agree with Frances Lee Ansley who says, “By ‘white supremacy’ I don’t mean only the self-conscious racism of white [nationalist] hate groups. I refer to a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across [many] settings.”⁹ I recognize myself and my world in that description and I

⁷ Ta Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, p. 9

⁸ Ibid

⁹ As quoted in *The Language of White Supremacy*, Vann R. Newkirk II, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/the-language-of-white-supremacy/542148/>

believe I am a participant in these systems of white supremacy. I believe the path of *teshuvah* demands that the first step for dismantling racial injustice is to name and confront white supremacy wherever we see it, be it in the White House, in our interactions with each other, or within ourselves.

For the sin of white supremacy, *s'lach lanu*, we seek forgiveness.

The second level of *teshuvah* is *m'chilah*, pardon, where the slate is wiped clean. Through *m'chilah*, we repair the relationship by offering restitution and restoring dignity to the injured party.

*Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha...*for the sin that we have committed...by not making reparation for the trauma caused by slavery.

I believe that the U.S. must make reparations to the African American community, otherwise our moral standing as a nation will always be compromised. I don't know exactly what that looks like, but I do know that there are many smart economists, lawmakers, and scholars who've given this issue deep consideration. I know that every year for more than three decades Congress has rejected HR 40, a bill that seeks to form a commission to develop reparation proposals to the African American community. And I know that The UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent has recommended that our government offer reparations to combat the injustices of slavery and perpetuating "racial terrorism". And I also know that truth and reconciliation commissions have helped other nations around the world begin to heal from heinous crimes against humanity that occurred on their native soil.

Clearly, there's a connection for us as a Jewish community. The shadow of the Shoah still looms large; we'll never fully recover from our grief. Still, we know what it means when perpetrators (or the descendants of perpetrators) acknowledge their crimes and try, insufficiently but earnestly, to make amends. In a *Los Angeles Times* editorial, Rabbi Sharon Brous writes, "As survivors of generational trauma and beneficiaries of reparations granted after the Holocaust, Jews have a special obligation to help advance this conversation... While no amount of money could give back what was taken, monetary compensation does signal moral culpability... Through reparations, Germany has begun to come to terms with its history and rebuilt itself into a thriving democracy."¹⁰ As Jewish Americans I believe we have a moral obligation to bear witness to the power of hearing remorse and receiving reparations.

For the sin of refusing to repair the devastation wrought by U.S. slavery, *m'chal lanu*, we seek pardon.

The final level of *teshuvah* is *kapparah*, full atonement, a clearing of the corrosion of sin and a return to the cosmic balance that was intended from the beginning of Creation. As the Rabbis taught, "Great is *teshuvah* because it brings healing to the world."¹¹

Now, I'm not so naïve as to believe that we can achieve a full *tikkun*, a full healing of racial injustice, on a national level any time soon. However, I know and love *this* community, and I'm convinced that together we can come very close to this vision here at Temple Beth Am.

¹⁰ Rabbi Sharon Brous, *Why Jews Should Support Reparations for Slavery*, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-brous-reparations-slavery-jews-holocaust-20180307-story.html>

¹¹ B. Tal Yoma 86b

Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha...for the sin that we have committed...by not fully living our congregational values.

From the time of our founding until now, our community has always wrestled with racial injustice in our society. Over the last year, we've turned our reflection upon ourselves. Our Scholar-in-Residence, April Baskin—followed by a learning group who studied audacious hospitality in depth—brought home the message that to be truly audacious within our synagogue we need to fully support all our members equitably. Can we say that we've fulfilled this obligation to Temple Beth Am members who are people of color? Or does our community function on silent messages that support a racial hierarchy? When we see a person of color in our lobby what assumptions do we make?

The Jewish community spans the globe, so of course we've always been racially diverse. Still, here at Temple Beth Am we're not immune to the impact of racism in North America, which seeps into our synagogue and “[affects] our ability to create authentic relationships across race...For too long, we've attempted to be ‘color blind’...thinking this would aid in creating equality in our Jewish spaces.”¹² As a community, we're ready to dive into honest conversations about race that might cause discomfort—starting with our *Selichot* workshop that evolved into the creation of a confessional prayer on racial injustice that we read today. We also have several book and discussion groups planned for the year ahead. In addition, we will explore launching another Audacious Hospitality learning group to ensure that we fulfill our obligations to all our members, particularly people of color. And moving forward, as we have always done, we will continue to use our synagogue voice to advocate for legislation that dismantles systemic racism in issues close to Temple Beth Am's heart, such as homelessness, health care and immigrant rights.

For the sin of perpetuating racial injustice within our own synagogue, *k'aper lanu*, we seek atonement.

On this Day of Days, regarding all these sins, we pray: *s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kapper lanu*, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

“Great is *teshuvah*” the Rabbis teach, “because it hastens redemption.”¹³

As we walk the path of *teshuvah*, we commit to facing the truth of slavery, and making amends for the sins of racism and white supremacy. Through *teshuvah*, we will hasten justice and redemption.

And on that day, as Isaiah promises, light will burst forth, our wounds will heal, and we will know that we were God's partner in creating the world anew.

¹² Union for Reform Judaism, *Audacious Hospitality Jews of Color Educational Resource Module*, p. 12

¹³ B. Tal Yoma 86b