

**Yom Kippur Morning Sermon
5781**

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“That’s not the point,” Marcus said.

“What is the point, Marcus?” asked Marjorie.

‘For all they knew, they were standing on top of what used to be a coal mine, a grave for all the black convicts who had been conscripted to work there. It was one thing to research something, another thing entirely to have lived it. To have felt it.

How could he explain to Marjorie that what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that she, and he, and everyone else, existed in it - not apart from it, but inside of it.’¹

So writes Yaa Gyasi in her award-winning novel, Homegoing.

I grew up inside it. But I didn’t know it.

Slavery. Jim Crow. Mass incarceration.

I grew up Richmond, Virginia, not far from Monument Avenue, a leafy grand boulevard, lined with statues of Confederate generals. But I didn’t learn very much about slavery in school – or anywhere else for that matter. I wasn’t taught about our country’s ugly history of racial terror or the trans-generational trauma that exists in African American families and communities. I knew about the civil rights movement, but I didn’t have a sense that racial injustice in America is “something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large,” nor did I feel like I was part of it.

Then, as a rabbi, I accompanied a group of Jewish teens to Alabama and Georgia on a “civil rights journey.” We visited the Equal Justice Initiative’s Legacy Museum, surveying the history of racial injustice from slavery through mass incarceration. We met with Bishop Calvin Woods, a hero of the civil rights movement, and heard his story of confronting the evil of racism face to face.

And we stood together at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the nation’s first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and capricious police violence.

Through these experiences the teens, and I along with them, gained a sense of the enormity of the injustice of slavery and its aftermath. We began to see ourselves as part of the ongoing story, part of the system that perpetuates racial injustice in America.

In his book, Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes a letter to his son describing his own experience of being Black in America:

“Son, I write you in your fifteenth year... This is your country, this is your world, this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it... Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed... I am afraid. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid... The law did not protect us... It does not matter if the agent of those forces is white or black—what matters is the system that makes your body breakable.”²

This past spring, I found myself once again in Richmond. In mid-march, as coronavirus cases in New York skyrocketed, my husband Joe and I packed up the car with our two kids and the cat and made our way south to my parents’ house. We ended up staying until June.

These were anxious months spent figuring out how to home-school our seven-year-old daughter, entertain and keep our toddler safe, navigate the new realities of grocery deliveries and multi-generational living, all while working full time jobs, worrying about friends and family still in New York and trying to sell an apartment in the midst of a pandemic.

And then, on May 25th, George Floyd was killed.

Richmond erupted in protest. The statues on Monument Avenue, big bronze Confederate soldiers astride their horses, were spray-painted with graffiti and eventually toppled from their stone pedestals.

Once again, I was inside it, only this time I knew it. I realized that it was a privilege to feel as if issues of race and racism were periodic episodes, demanding my attention intermittently, rather than ongoing, daily realities.

This summer, as I drove my car down Monument Avenue, I had a different understanding of the power those statues held, the damage they had done and the cruelty they represented. This summer, I finally saw racial injustice in Richmond, and in America, as “something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large” that we were all part of it. I saw the history of my city in a new light and I saw that it was changing. I saw myself in a new way and I saw that I was changing too. Things that were never discussed became topics of conversation at the dinner table and around town. There was certainly not consensus and disagreements among Richmonders were, and continue to be, fierce. But the conversation is happening, change has begun, and that gives me hope.

This belief that change is possible is at the core of our Yom Kippur liturgy. So too is the understanding that change, *t'shuvah*, returning to the right path, begins with acknowledging our sins. This is hard for many of us. The language of sin sounds harsh and we hesitate to label our actions as such, preferring instead to say that we've made mistakes, fallen short or missed the mark. And yet, as the liturgy scholar, my teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman reminds us, “some errors are morally repugnant. When harm is unleashed at a magnitude that exceeds a mere mistake, we need a word like “sin” to do justice to the immoral act.”

The sin of slavery and the four centuries of racial injustice in America that followed, right up until today, must be called out as such.

For us to change, for our country to change, we must engage in true teshuvah, beginning with an acknowledgement of the sin and our part in it.

We recite two standard confessions, Ashamnu and Al Chet, during every service of Yom Kippur, with the exception of Neilah, when we only recite Ashamnu. Rabbi Hoffman explains that “these public confessions reflect the issue of sin as it impacts...the community, rather than just the individual. While we are expected to make our private confessions, coming to terms with God for our own sins, Judaism is not just for individuals as sole isolates, but for individuals as members of communities... [Judaism] teaches that to assure a just society, all of us must be held at least partially accountable for one another - even if we did not personally commit a particular sin, we likely stood idly by when others committed it.”³

This is the burden, the weight of sin, both personal and communal. Carrying this sin, accepting responsibility for such sin is heavy, a daunting task. And yet, as Rabbi Moses ibn Ezra, the 11th century Spanish philosopher and poet reminds us, “no sin is so light that it may be overlooked; no sin is so heavy that it may not be repented of.”⁴

Writing about the memory and trauma of slavery and racial injustice, Yaa Gyasi continues in her novel:

How could [Marcus] explain to Marjorie that he wasn't supposed to be here? Alive. Free. That the fact that he had been born, that he wasn't in a jail cell somewhere, was not by dint of his pulling himself up by the bootstraps, not by hard work or belief in the American Dream, **but by mere chance**. He had only heard tell of his great-grandpa H from Ma Willie, but those stories were enough to make him weep and to fill him with pride.

Two-Shovel H they had called him. But what had they called his father or his father before him? What of the mothers? They had been products of their time, and walking in Birmingham now, Marcus was an accumulation of these times. That was the point.”⁵

The story of racial injustice in America is “something that stretches so far back, is so impossibly large,” that we — yes, we Jews — and everyone else, exist in it and not apart from it.

BUT that injustice doesn't have to be the story forever.

The teens who traveled to the south with me know this. The protesters who demand that we say their names: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daniel Prude, Eric Garner, Amaud Arbury, and so many others, they know this too.

Yom Kippur comes to tell us that when we confess our sins, when we own up to the really hard stuff, *t'shuvah* is possible.

Ashamnu, Bagadnu. We have trespassed, we have betrayed. Al Chet Shechatanu L'fanecha, We have sinned before You, O God, by turning a blind eye to the hatred and violence that is so baked into our society that we don't even see it. We have sinned before You, O God, when we have benefitted from our privilege while ignoring the pain and suffering of people of color, including Jews of color. We have sinned. And still, change is possible. Still, O God, You wait for us to return - to return to You, to return to the right path, to the path of justice.

It is not too late, no sin is too heavy. Change is possible.

That is the point.

Notes

¹ Excerpt from Homegoing, Yaa Gyasi, p. 255-256

² Excerpts from Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates, p. 12-13, 17, 22

³ Excerpt from Interview with Rabbi Larry Hoffman on reformjudaism.org about his book We Have Sinned: Confession in Judaism

⁴ As quoted in Mahzor Lev Shalem, p. 234

⁵ Excerpt from Homegoing, Yaa Gyasi, p. 255-256