

## **Kol Nidre Sermon - 5781**

### **Rabbi Ari Kaiman**

In the aftermath of the tragic death of George Floyd under the knee of a police officer, the Forward asked American Rabbis for their responses. While there were many very good responses, I'd like to share the words of one of my Rabbis and teachers, Aaron Alexander of Adas Israel in Washington DC.

I can take it off.

I've experienced hate,

bigotry unchecked.

Passersby see it on my head

and unprovoked hatred swells red.

I know the pain, a burden

of being other than, but

I can take it off.

My kippah, removed

leaves me safe, invisible in masses.

A hat, still covered before my Creator

secure, sheltered in the open.

My pain a self-chosen shame

not a lack of pride, but an escape inside.

Because I can take it off.

My skin is my privilege, unearned

Even amidst other privileges, hard won.

But you can't take it off.

Your burden, your pride

Your birth, denied.

Kills you outside.

Nowhere to hide.

I can take it off.

#blacklivesmatter

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? For seventeen years I have chosen to wear a Kippah in public, every day. Not because God commands me to do so, but because I want my proud Jewish identity to be visible to everyone. I'm proud of our history, our values, our achievements, I'm proud to be a representative of our people. Though I didn't choose the kippah until I was 21, I've never tried to hide my Jewish identity. My parents named their children, Ari, Shira, and Aliza in Pensacola, Florida, and I grew up proud that my name rooted me in our people, and identified me as part of the Jewish community. While there have been times that my visible and proud Jewish identity has made me the target of hate, anti-Semitism has rarely made me fear for my safety. We live in America, George Washington welcomed us. We live in America, where we are free to pursue life, liberty, and justice. We live in America, the land of opportunity, where the Jewish community has prospered, and anti-Semitism is condemned by our government everywhere it exists. We live in America, where both Democrats and Republicans support and protect our special relationship with Israel. We live in America, where we are encouraged to stand up for ourselves.

Saying Black Lives Matter is an act of allyship - an act of recognizing that when a representative of the government takes a black life, crying out for breath, the symbolic oppression it evokes is different than other acts of violence that we endure as a nation. I bought our Black Lives Matter sign in St. Louis after my student Tony Westbrook came to me and taught me his

experience as a black man in America, and how the death of Michael Brown felt to him. I marched with my student, my teacher in the following weeks as the phrase, “Black Lives Matter” captured the national attention. That sign stayed in my garage for too long, my congregants who owned shops in Ferguson, the ones who called Michael Brown a thug, the ones who didn’t want to see the symbolic meaning that animated the protests but only saw a large black man who assaulted a police officer, they wanted me fired for my allyship, and they successfully stopped my allyship short. When a few voices in an organization that called itself the Movement For Black Lives managed to successfully insert a footnote in their platform that wrongly accused Israel of genocide, claims of Black Lives Matter equaled anti-Semitism kept the sign tucked away in my basement, kept me from saying those three words publicly for years, even as I worked to strengthen my bond and educate myself with the black community here. The new platform from the Movement For Black Lives has removed any mention of Israel, but the phrase “Black Lives Matter” should never have been so hard for me to say. That sign is now in my yard, but a sign is only a symbol that I have a lot of spiritual work to do to bring more justice as an American Rabbi to our community.

Tonight I wish to speak about American Judaism, racial justice, and Teshuva.

If I had an hour, I’d tell the story of how Jews in America weren’t always considered “white.” Not long ago, we were rejected by many, how anti-Semitism was once much more prevalent than today. I’d tell the story of how our acceptance today is precarious. We have lost our privilege before, and we could, once again, find ourselves out of favor. We fought to be accepted here, and largely, we have won that acceptance. But, our acceptance has come with a cost, and a responsibility. Anti-Semitism and Racism are inextricably linked.

Earlier this year, my friend, congregant and teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Crane published an excellent work titled, Judaism, Race, and Ethics. One of the chapters is authored by Dr. Judith Kaye, professor emerita of religious and social ethics and African American studies at the University of Puget Sound. She argues that anti-Semitism survives through the ages because we are made to be “middle agents, in the economic classes” both oppressed and oppressors, both targets of white supremacists and also given privilege and

success as white people. This dynamic, especially in our polarized environment, can even have us turn on ourselves, arguing about so called “anti-semitism on the left, who the claim that we are aligned with white oppressors” and “anti-semitism on the right, who say “Jews will not replace us” “Us” meaning the “White oppressors.”

This dynamic is dangerous, because when we argue even about how to fight anti-semitism without understanding its intersections with racism and oppression in general it becomes difficult to stand up for ourselves and say, *“Im ain ani li, mi li - If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”* We have to not only stand for ourselves, but if we are to live our Jewish values fully, if we are to realize our own power and potential, we must say, *U'kshe-ani l'atzmi, mah ani?” - If I am only for myself, what am I?”*

When we ally ourselves and say “Black Lives Matter” it doesn't diminish our ability to say, If I am not for myself, who will be for me, to the contrary, saying Black Lives Matter is an act that gives greater meaning to our collective self-interest and identity. If I am only for myself, then the answer to what am I is that I am only activating my yetzer Hara - the self-interested inclination, without any yetzer hatov - the altruistic inclination.

*Im Lo Achshav, Aimatai* - If not now, when? Yom Kippur is our time to stand before God and collectively confess our sins. It is crucial that we understand and accept the challenge of collective power and confession. You may not have spoken a bigoted word, but WE have committed the sin of speech, *Al Chet Shechatnu b'vitui sefatayim*. I may not have cheated, but WE have committed the sin of cheating for our self-interest, *al chet shechatnu b'hona-at reah*. You and I may not have committed the sin of baseless hatred, but in fact, WE have committed the sin of not accepting those different than we are; *al chet shechatnu b'sinat chinam*. *V'al Kulam Eloha Selichot, Slash Lanu, Machal Lanu, Kaper Lanu*. For all of these, God of Forgiveness, Forgive Us, Pardon Us, Grant us atonement. Atoning for the sins of racism and repenting to do better requires no personal bigotry toward black people, no active oppression, no intentional support of white supremacy. Atoning for the sins of racism requires all of us to recognize that there is a communal sin of complicity, and that collectively WE can do better.

In the generation of Ashkenazi Jews in America becoming white, we forgot that we were an *erev-rav*, a mixed multitude that came out of Egypt. We were multi-racial from the very beginning. Jews with darker skin have the added burden of too often needing to justify their identity in their intersecting groups. *Al Chet Shechatanu* - For the sin we have sinned before You in assuming Jews are white, and anyone else isn't.

We say, Never Forget, and advocate for Holocaust education, but do we educate about the millions of lives lost in the slave trade? Are we educated about the way that slavery gave way to legal discrimination under Jim Crow, and legal discrimination today in a so called color blind mass incarceration system? Every single day, we are commanded to remember that we were slaves in Egypt, but we still haven't fully confronted the legacy of how this country's economy was built on the exploitation and degradation of black bodies. Fully confronting the legacy of slavery is painful and shameful for us, just as Germans today were not directly responsible for the Nazi Germany, but still directly confront its legacy. *Al Chet Shechatanu* - for the sin that we have sinned before you in not recognizing that our story obligates us to hear the echoes of the story in other peoples through history - in particular African Americans in this country.

Racial justice is possible. We as American Jews have a role we can play. To be explicitly clear, racial justice is not a partisan issue, at least it should not be. Both Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives have been complicit in perpetuating racist policies. Both Republicans and Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals have enacted policies that are anti-racist. Justice has no party, and all people, including our elected officials can better themselves, every individual can do *teshuva*, and we can do *teshuva* collectively as well, but only if we are willing to confront the wrongs we are collectively responsible for.

We can do better, and this is the holiday to heed the call of our member Jada Garret who published a Tashlich Ritual with Be'chol Lashon to cast off our sins of inaction about racism. Jada helps lead our Equity committee that creates opportunities for Shearith members to educate ourselves and take action against racism in ourselves and our community. The equity committee will be leading a conversation about Billie Holliday's song "Strange Fruit" on October

25th at 4:00pm. Committing to learning together is one of the ways we can do better.

We can do better. Policies of the criminal justice system are deeply broken. We send more people to prison than any other country. 4.4 percent of the world's population are in the United States, but we house 22 percent of the world's prison population. It's a system that criminalizes black bodies at rates far beyond what is reasonable and keeps them locked in an undercaste. Our work under the umbrella of Ahavat Chinam supporting criminal justice reform and record restriction summits is ongoing, and part of a commitment that Shearith be an anti-racist community. Committing to supporting anti-racist policies and sensible reform of our justice system is one of the ways we can do better.

We are American Jews. If we are not anti-racist, if we support racist policies, we risk turning American and Judaism into an either/or proposition, either American or Jews.

God created human beings in God's image, and not of us is alike the other. In the Talmud we are taught that God created Adam HaRishon alone so that no person could say, my parents are greater than your parents. Though our long history has plenty of bigoted and racist stories, our origin is anti-racist. We were meant to be a blessing to all peoples. The promise to Abraham was that God would bless those who bless us and curse those that curse us. Our existence creates a cycle of blessing or a cycle of cursing.

If we embrace white-supremacist policies, we may succeed at being American, but we will be rejecting our Jewish heritage. And if we reject white-supremacist policies, but they become ascendant nonetheless, we may be Jewish, but no longer American. That's why we as Jews must support an America that commits becomes anti-racist, and help show what it means to fulfill the promise of Avraham Avinu *v'heye bracha*, and be a blessing.

May we all be sealed in the book of life and goodness.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.