

Book Notes – Rabbi Steven Rubenstein

I'm Not White, I'm Jewish

Back when I rapped in high school
People told me that I'm tight for a white dude
(What you tell em'?)
I'm not white I'm Jewish, I'm not white I'm Jewish.

-Matt Bar, Bible Raps

Had I been asked what race I was when I was growing up in Queens, New York in the 1970's I would have said that I was white. What else would I be after all? I knew that I was Jewish of course, but at a certain point I also realized that being Jewish (at least the kind of Jewish that I was) meant that my family came from Eastern Europe. The public school I attended was somewhat diverse I suppose – with some Italians, Greeks, as well as African-Americans. But Jews were over represented in comparison to the overall population. My great-grandparents were from Eastern Europe and since people from that part of the world were white (or at least looked white, or some shade of what we usually mean by white), I must be white.

In the past several years I've read a series of books which could all fit under the heading of the African-American experience. I read them because they're interesting. I read them because they were well written. And I read them because it seems like an appropriate thing to do right now. I suppose the same could have been said a decade ago, a century ago, as well as before the birth of our nation. I don't need to recount the reasons why the African-American experience is relevant in 21st century America. You see it in the news daily. And while some claim that focusing on race only exacerbates a difficult situation, I've never believed that.

Part of my reading in this area is simply my way of trying to educate myself about a part of American history and contemporary society that a person like me just doesn't have--and I have quite a bit of education. I'm from New York City and I've

lived in Detroit now for 13 years. I studied political science as an undergrad and I am a reader of both fiction and nonfiction. And if I'm not kidding myself, I would say that I've been aware and interested in the issue of race all my adult life. And still, I just don't think that I have the basics. I'm catching up – and I feel like I have a long way to go. To be honest, I can't fully explain how a deeper knowledge will translate into my individual life. It seems easier to argue this in a broader way. That is, if all Americans – and by that I mean, "white" Americans - were to have a better grasp on African-American history and the African-American experience today, some things might change in our society that might make life better for everyone in our society. A start would be to understand the degree to which white-ness is more a social category and far less of a biological/racial category than most of us have been raised to believe. The song lyric that I quoted at the outset of this article is just one expression of this. You can see that when Matt Bar (the founder of Bible Raps) was starting out in the rap world, he spent a lot of time with African-Americans. The joke inherent in the lyric, that he was a pretty good rapper for a white guy, gets turned on its side when he responds, 'I'm not white, I'm Jewish.' Of course, the point isn't that Jews are particularly good rappers. Instead, Bar is able to express his identity, his Jewish identity. The emphasis here is that being Jewish is different from being a Caucasian American.

A brief word (since it might be necessary to explain to some reading this) as to why a rabbi is dedicating his time to reading and reflecting on the African-American experience. First, this is a Jewish issue in part because there are African American Jews, not to mention Jews of all colors. But more than that, the simple reason that I've been reading up is that I'm an American. I've lived here my whole life. I'm a bit embarrassed to know so little about this part of American history. I don't know enough to be able to engage fully in this aspect of contemporary American politics. The American Jewish experience has always been intertwined with the broader American experience. This is part of our civic duty as American Jews.

Here are a few of the books about American history and the African American experience that I've read in the past couple of years that others might find interesting.

Note: I've put a brief note in parentheses by me but the main description of each book comes from Amazon to give a fuller explanation of each book)

Fiction

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

(This is a beautifully written book and it is also awful in its depiction of slavery. Some people may still have in their minds the false notion that slavery ‘wasn’t really so bad’ or that at least the slaves were ‘taken care of’ by their owners. While the Underground Railroad is a novel, the depiction of slavery at the outset of the book is based on slave narratives. The first few chapters are an education unto themselves. –SR).

Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. Life is hell for all the slaves, but especially bad for Cora; an outcast even among her fellow Africans, she is coming into womanhood—where even greater pain awaits. When Caesar, a recent arrival from Virginia, tells her about the Underground Railroad, they decide to take a terrifying risk and escape. Matters do not go as planned—Cora kills a young white boy who tries to capture her. Though they manage to find a station and head north, they are being hunted.

In Whitehead’s ingenious conception, the Underground Railroad is no mere metaphor—engineers and conductors operate a secret network of tracks and tunnels beneath the Southern soil. Cora and Caesar’s first stop is South Carolina, in a city that initially seems like a haven. But the city’s placid surface masks an insidious scheme designed for its black denizens. And even worse: Ridgeway, the relentless slave catcher, is close on their heels. Forced to flee again, Cora embarks on a harrowing flight, state by state, seeking true freedom.

Memoirs and First-person accounts

Tears That Won't Stop: A Sermon To White America by Michael Eric Dyson

(It is easy to feel defensive while reading this book. Best to push through that emotion and keep reading. –SR)

Short, emotional, literary, powerful—*Tears We Cannot Stop* is the book that all Americans who care about the current and long-burning crisis in race relations will want to read.

As the country grapples with racist division at a level not seen since the 1960s, one man's voice soars above the rest with conviction and compassion. In his

2016 *New York Times* op-ed piece "Death in Black and White," Michael Eric Dyson moved a nation. Now he continues to speak out in *Tears We Cannot Stop*—a provocative and deeply personal call for change. Dyson argues that if we are to make real racial progress we must face difficult truths, including being honest about how black grievance has been ignored, dismissed, or discounted.

Autobiography of Frederick Douglass

(with thanks to Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles for mentioning that he was reading this at on one of his Q & A podcasts with rabbinical students in LA. His mention of the book sent me looking for it. -SR)

Former slave, impassioned abolitionist, brilliant writer, newspaper editor and eloquent orator whose speeches fired the abolitionist cause, Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) led an astounding life. Physical abuse, deprivation and tragedy plagued his early years, yet through sheer force of character he was able to overcome these obstacles to become a leading spokesman for his people. In this, the first and most frequently read of his three autobiographies, Douglass provides graphic descriptions of his childhood and horrifying experiences as a slave as well as a harrowing record of his dramatic escape to the North and eventual freedom.

Published in 1845 to quell doubts about his origins — since few slaves of that period could write — the *Narrative* is admired today for its extraordinary passion, sensitive and vivid descriptions and storytelling power. It belongs in the library of anyone interested in African-American history and the life of one of the country's most courageous and influential champions of civil rights.

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

(Coates is a staff writer for The Atlantic Monthly. Check him out there for long-form essays about American government housing policy which created greater segregation—not in the 1800s but in the middle of the 1900s! -SR)

In a profound work that pivots from the biggest questions about American history and ideals to the most intimate concerns of a father for his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a powerful new framework for understanding our nation's history and current crisis. Americans have built an empire on the idea of “race,” a falsehood that damages us all but falls most heavily on the bodies of black women and

men—bodies exploited through slavery and segregation, and, today, threatened, locked up, and murdered out of all proportion. What is it like to inhabit a black body and find a way to live within it? And how can we all honestly reckon with this fraught history and free ourselves from its burden?

Between the World and Me is Ta-Nehisi Coates' attempt to answer these questions in a letter to his adolescent son. Coates shares with his son—and readers—the story of his awakening to the truth about his place in the world through a series of revelatory experiences, from Howard University to Civil War battlefields, from the South Side of Chicago to Paris, from his childhood home to the living rooms of mothers whose children's lives were taken as American plunder. Beautifully woven from personal narrative, reimagined history, and fresh, emotionally charged reportage, *Between the World and Me* clearly illuminates the past, bracingly confronts our present, and offers a transcendent vision for a way forward.

Non-Fiction

The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World by Greg Grandin

(There is much to learn here---slave trade in South America, the role of the north in the slave trade. –SR)

One morning in 1805, off a remote island in the South Pacific, Captain Amasa Delano, a New England seal hunter, climbed aboard a distressed Spanish ship carrying scores of West Africans he thought were slaves. They weren't. In fact, they were performing an elaborate ruse, having risen up earlier and slaughtered most of the crew and officers. When Delano, an idealistic, anti-slavery republican, finally realized the deception—that the men and women he thought were humble slaves were actually running the ship—he rallied his crew to respond with explosive violence.

Drawing on research on four continents, *The Empire of Necessity* is the untold history of this extraordinary event and its bloody aftermath. Delano's blindness that day has already inspired one masterpiece—Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*. Now historian Greg Grandin returns to these dramatic events to paint an indelible portrait of a world in the throes of revolution, providing a new transnational

history of slavery in the Americas—and capturing the clash of peoples, economies, and faiths that was the New World in the early 1800s.

Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution by Eric Foner

(If you are like me, you may remember learning about the Civil War back in high school. The story went a bit like this---The North wins the war, Lincoln is assassinated, and suddenly Teddy Roosevelt is president. What I missed (and perhaps you did too) is Reconstruction. Foner's book is the classic on this topic of the choices that were made to incorporate former slaves into American society through the economy, education, and socially...and how this fell apart. – SR)

Eric Foner's "masterful treatment of one of the most complex periods of American history" (*New Republic*) redefined how the post-Civil War period was viewed.

Reconstruction chronicles the way in which Americans—black and white—responded to the unprecedented changes unleashed by the war and the end of slavery. It addresses the ways in which the emancipated slaves' quest for economic autonomy and equal citizenship shaped the political agenda of Reconstruction; the remodeling of Southern society and the place of planters, merchants, and small farmers within it; the evolution of racial attitudes and patterns of race relations; and the emergence of a national state possessing vastly expanded authority and committed, for a time, to the principle of equal rights for all Americans.

This "smart book of enormous strengths" (*Boston Globe*) remains the standard work on the wrenching post-Civil War period—an era whose legacy still reverberates in the United States today.