Two years ago, Aryeh took our son Daniel and my step-son, Dror down to Bogalusa, Louisiana. It was the 50th anniversary of Aryeh's civil rights work and he wanted to show his sons the place where he worked with grassroots organizers in pursuit of justice. I'm proud of what my husband, Aryeh, and others in our congregation did during the civil rights movement. And here we are so many years later. The civil rights movement won important victories but many of us are just waking up to the **ongoing** structural disenfranchisement of communities of color in our country. It's time to take an honest look at our country's history and the ways many of us have benefited from racial inequality.

Now is the time to take an honest look. That's one reason we're here during these ten days, and why we come back every year for the High Holidays. To take a close look at human activity. To examine what it means to be human. And this year, I'm asking us to look into the history and current issue of racism in America. Race and racism are human constructs.

America's founders brought the first slave ships to our country in August of 1619. More than 20 slaves arrived in what we now know as Virginia. As was written on the cover of the NYT magazine on August 18, "America was not yet America, but this was the moment it all began. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the 250 years of slavery that followed." When I decided to go to Alabama with 50 Reform rabbis, on a trip entitled, "Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation," I didn't realize I would be on this journey during the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first slave ship. And it was during this trip that I met some amazing human beings with painful and courageous stories.

On our first day of this journey, in Montgomery, we visited both the Equal Justice Initiative Legacy Museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice to learn about our country's painful history of racial destruction and exploitation.

The Legacy Museum features audio, exhibits, art, videos, and written material about the legacy of enslavement through modern day issues of mass incarceration. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is an outdoor memorial on a large piece of property where one walks a path through our history of racial injustice with names and places of where black people were lynched, burned, or murdered in other brutal ways. In the words of Bryan Stevenson, who is the founder of these two important places, and author of the book, Just Mercy, "It's important to understand all the ugly details so we can one day claim something really beautiful."

Human activity…

By the time she was 11 years old, Joanne Bland had been arrested and jailed at least 13 times. She was the youngest person jailed during any civil rights demonstration. She marched with roughly 600 other people over the Edmund Pettus bridge on January 30, 1972, on the day that is often referred to as Bloody Sunday. These civil rights activists were brutally beaten, tear gassed and hit by policemen on horses with billy clubs. Once again, human activity.

We walked over this bridge and then met with Joanne Bland. She shared her story with us and she spoke about fear. Her mother died when she was

young. Joanne's older sister, Lynda, shared this story in a collection of their shared memories.

She writes that she was only 7 years old when their mother died and, "As long as I live, I will always believe that segregation was the cause of our mother's death…" She acknowledged her personal belief that each person has a time that they are called to die, and that death is a natural part of life. But this story is different.

She wrote that she heard some of the adults say, "She'd be alive today if she wasn't colored". Her mother was pregnant and the baby she carried died as well. Her mother was taken to Burwell's Infirmary, not the local hospital that served white people. The infirmary didn't have the equipment needed to do a blood transfusion and they didn't even have the right blood for her mother. If her mother had been allowed to be served by the hospital for white people, she could have gotten the transfusion right away, but because her mother was a black woman, she wasn't allowed any services at that hospital.

The blood had to come by bus to Selma from Birmingham, which took a number of hours. By the time the blood arrived, her father went to get it from the bus station, but when he got to Burwell's Infirmary, it was too late. She died in the hallway, waiting for the blood. Segregation killed this woman, and her four children grew up without a mother.

And now we have more black children growing up without parents. Some of their parents, as in the case of Eric Garner, have been killed by law enforcement. Eric Garner was the father of six children, and at the time of his death he had a 3-month-old baby. Many other children have parents in prison. In the past 40 years we have seen more than a 600 percent

increase in incarceration rates, a mass incarceration that devastates black communities. According to Professor Michelle Alexander, who wrote the book The New Jim Crow, today there are more African Americans in prison or jail, on probation or parole, than were enslaved in 1850. And after they serve their time, they have felonies on their record. Imagine how hard it must be to find a place to live or a job with a felony record. And it's perfectly legal to discriminate against people with a felony record, for the rest of their lives. African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites. Nationwide, African American children represent 32% of children who are arrested. While this trend is beginning to change, due to convictions for opioid use and a decline in arrests for crack cocaine Human activity…

I was so pleased to see TBE member Maria Gitin's book on sale at the Dexter Parsonage Museum book store where Dr King and his family lived. Our past Jewish connection to Civil Rights is just a starting point. There is so much more work to be done now. Bettina Apthecker, another TBE member and UCSC professor, has suggested books and articles that have helped me in my process of beginning to understand the depth of this issue. We are in a position to educate ourselves and open ourselves up to examining how we can be allies in the work of racial justice. Rev Deborah Johnson from Inner Light and I will be facilitating book groups after the first of the year. And we will be screening a film called True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Equality. Facing the reality of our history and how it has impacted the inequality we face now is our first step. This process can be painful because we must face our own inclination to run away from difficult truths.

ln Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil, author Susan Neiman looks at how Germany has made efforts to come to terms with the insidious and horrific history of the Shoah. She explains a phrase that she heard quite often during the years she lived and taught in Berlin. She shares that,

"Ver-gangen heitsaufar beitung—working-off-the-past" —was one of the first phrases she added to her German vocabulary." She explains how surprised she was when she learned that right after WW 2 most Germans were more focused on the suffering they endured. For decades, they asked, "Hadn't they lost sons and husbands, fathers and brothers on the field? Hadn't most of the men who survived been taken prisoner, as often as not to Siberia? Hadn't the women and children spent night after night shivering in cellars from cold and from fear of the bombs that burned or blew their cities to bits? Hadn't they lost a quarter of the territory that belonged to Germany for centuries?" It was the younger generation of Germans who started asking questions of their parents and grandparents. They wanted answers. The Nuremberg Trials and the trial of Adolph Eichmann provided clear answers and propelled Germans to take an honest look at the atrocities committed by their country.

"Vergangen-heits-aufar-beitung—working-off-the-past. Human activity. It's hard to walk around Berlin without seeing a plaque on a wall or the ground, commemorating an atrocity that took place in that location.

And in this country some are still arguing about the removal of statues of confederate "heroes". We can learn from the Germans about how to work off the past, and shape our future.

The first step for us is to be honest about **our** country's history and to look at how we may be complicit in perpetuating inequality.

Let's remember that 20 percent of Jews are either not-white or non-Ashkenazi. In order to change attitudes about race we can't ignore the racism that exists within our own communities. There is a compounded measure of marginalization that Jews of color deal with.

African American writer and activist, Ta-Nahisi Coates said that "An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future."

Just yesterday, Jewish communities all around the world read from the Torah portion called Nitzavim. The name of the portion comes from the word meaning to stand firmly. Moses tells the people that all of them, including their leaders and their elders, are standing firmly before the Divine and what they are being commanded to do, is not hidden, not concealed, and it is not far away. It's not up in the heavens, or across the sea. He says, "this thing, (returning to our highest values) is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it." Lo bashamayim hi…

Racial justice is in our hands. Understanding how white people have benefited from our country's enslavement and oppression of people of color, is up to us now. We must stand firmly and act together.