

Leshana Tova!¹

Shana Tova!

In August, Rabbi Ariann and I were meeting to prepare for the Days of Awe and talking about sermon topics.

I said: “I think, I’m going to give a talk about racism and how we should be thinking about it as Jews and as Americans.”

And then I said: “No way, I already called dibs on that one.”

I was stunned into silence by the barbs of my friendly colleague.

I was pleased by my colleague’s thoughtful pause.

Upon consideration, we decided that we might both speak on this topic.

When two people study Torah, the presence of God dwells between them.

We think that having open dialogue about the impact of race on our lives and how we respond to it is its own Torah.

We trust that the more we can do this as a congregation, the more God will dwell among us.

Why are we talking about this?

Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Natasha McKenna, Walter Scott, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Yvette Smith, Rekia Boyd, Sean Bell, Charleston

¹ Much of this sermon was a response to the writing of John A. Powell in his book *Racing To Justice*. While I don’t think we directly quoted him many of our thoughts were from or inspired by his book. We highly recommend it for anyone interested in thinking more about the impact of race and how to address racial inequality in the United States. We were also inspired by essays and ideas by Yavilah McCoy and Leo Furgeson.

Why are we talking about this right now?

Because of Charles Kinsey – a black therapist in South Florida, shot by police while attempting to calm a patient.

Because of Korryn Gaines – a 23 year old black woman shot in her own home by the police.

Because of Kouren Thomas, shot by a white neighbor for making noise at a party.

Because of Alfred Olango – an unarmed black man shot for “acting erratically” after his sister called for emergency psychiatric help.

These are all stories from 2016.

Because in this very unusual election cycle, we’ve seen endorsements from David Duke and leaders of the so-called alt-right. We have seen heated racializing rhetoric directed towards Latinos, and Muslims, and immigrants. And this language from these sources gives us pause as Jews to think about its relationship to what feels like a current uptick in anti-Semitism.

Our hope for this talk is not to “call out” our community as guilty of conscious or unconscious racism. Our hope, instead of calling out, is to “call in” this community to the conversation, to the table, to the voices of Jews of color.

Maybe the word “racism” has already produced a feeling of tension, defensiveness or anticipation.

We invite you to practice the art of listening with non-judgmental curiosity.

In 1963, Abraham Joshua Heschel was asked to address a conference on religion and race.

In that address he said:

“An honest estimation of the moral state of our society will disclose:

Some are guilty, but all are responsible.

If we admit that the individual is

in some measure conditioned or affected by the public climate of opinion,

an individual's crime discloses society's corruption."²

Today we recite lists of sins

chanting the *ashamnu* and *al chet*,

acknowledging that our sins are bound up with one another.

We communally acknowledge

that our actions are impacted

by the communities and cultures we live in.

That our own *teshuva* can help to change the world.

Rabbi Ariann and I want to talk specifically

about three examples from our liturgy of *chet* - missing the mark -

that we think are helpful

in our work for racial *teshuvah* - repair.

Al chet shechatanu lefanecha bivli da'at -

For the sin we committed before you without knowing, without paying attention, by not choosing to be aware of knowledge that arises from experiences outside our own.

We can be so afraid to talk openly about racism, but failing to talk about race and racism allows a sin of *bli da'at* (not knowing) on the part of the Jewish community.

Research suggests that 20% of the American Jewish population are Jews of color.

² *Religion & Race*, Heschel

These numbers are sadly not represented in our synagogues.

When we talk about racism, we too often cast it as a problem only happening outside of the synagogue walls, outside of Jewish community.

Last year, BK member Noemi Giszpenc agitated for and organized an anti-racism study group. The group's creation was a response to our mutual feeling that something is going very wrong, that the racist horrors of the past aren't over and need urgent attention.

Among the things we've discussed is the idea of colorblindness.

Many of us were raised, or raised our own children, to be color blind. The theory of color blindness is a beautiful one. If we're all created in the image of God –*betzelem Elohim* – skin pigments seems a ridiculous frame for judging another. Doesn't it make the most sense to treat every human being in exactly the same way? And we've learned from science that "race" as a category is not really biologically meaningful.

Black people and white people and Asian people and indigenous people are all the same underneath our various pigmentations.

But sometimes not noticing racial differences is just blinding.

I don't worry someone will think I'm a shoplifter when I go into a store. When I get pulled over, I only worry about getting a ticket.

These experiences, and so many more, are what people call "white privilege." It doesn't feel like a privilege, though. It just feels normal. It feels surprising, even though I know it intellectually, to find out that family and friends of color don't experience my version of normal. That surprise is also a privilege.

Paradoxically, color blindness

can erase the real lived experiences of race.

Rather than erasing the construction of race, it hides it.

If this is a sin of unawareness - *bli daat* - of what then should we be aware?

As Jews, one thing we are aware of
is our own experiences of discrimination.

According to the FBI,

57% of anti-religious hate crimes in the US last year
were committed against Jews.

There is a reason we still sometimes feel targeted as Jews.

Five years ago, we used our Yom Kippur Martyrology
to memorialize

Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner,
both Jewish,

who along with James Chaney

were killed for registering voters in Mississippi in 1964.

The white organizers who participated in Freedom Summer were
disproportionately Jewish.

I feel proud of that fact.

This involvement was fueled by Judaism's profound teachings
about justice, compassion and responsibility.

But Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movement

was also fueled

by our suffering,

by our self interest.

When Jews began working in the Civil Rights Movement
they were still trying to voice

the pain and trauma of the Holocaust
along with its own racialization of the Jewish people.

In 1964, Jews knew the sting of being excluded from restaurants, clubs,
and neighborhoods.

My grandfather's family changed their last name to Baker.

My proudly Jewish grandmother sometimes felt it wise to wear a small
crucifix to job interviews.

Jews were eager to pass into the world of white gentiles.

Our struggle for freedom and safety as Jews
will always be linked to the struggle against racism.

It is truly incredible how far we've come as a Jewish community.
We are so much better off than our grandparents could have imagined.

And opportunities have also expanded for African Americans, Latinos
and Asian Americans.

But as more explicit and crass forms of racism have receded, it has
become easier to see barriers that were previously not visible. The civil
rights movement of the 60's couldn't have imagined the barriers that lay
past equal opportunity on paper and in the law. Civil rights leaders of
the 60s didn't know that school desegregation would not do very much
to solve housing segregation. They didn't know that opening the pools
and community centers and country clubs wouldn't come along with
fairness in policing.

This is not a moment for complacency. We can notice all of the places
where things are not okay and shine a light on them.

Things are not worse than ever, but today there are cell phone videos
and social media, and many more ways to notice what is still broken
and take responsibility for helping to fix it.

Though we may see more than ever before,

when it comes to race,
there will likely always be areas of *bli daat* -
areas we are blind to.

But we can also commit to open our eyes
to ever deeper *daat* - ever deeper knowing and understanding.

Al chet shechatanu lefanecha *bisrirut*

We must avoid the sin of turning away *sararnu*,
and instead choose to consciously turn towards.

On Friday, July 8th, I woke up to the news of five police officers killed in Dallas the night before.

My heart was already broken by the killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille earlier that week. I felt hopeless and devastated. Somehow I felt compelled to **turn toward** these feelings.

I spent the next several hours on the phone trying to figure out how the faith community of Montclair could respond.

Finally, I reached Rev. Jevon Caldwell-Gross of St. Mark's Methodist on Elm St.

He said: "We were thinking of holding a vigil next week for our congregation." I said: "Can we come and support you?"

He was a little surprised at the offer, but accepted enthusiastically. And so St. Mark's was packed the following Monday night, mostly with members of other churches and synagogues.

At the end of the night, Rev. Caldwell-Gross opened the floor to anyone who wanted to speak.

I was surprised that almost every single person who got up to speak was Black. I wondered – were white people afraid to get up and talk about race? Particularly in a space that wasn't mostly-white?

On the other hand, I was delighted - are white people getting better at listening?

Are we getting better at taking up less space? Are we turning toward the stories of marginalized people in our own community with open hearts?

As a white Jew, I am trying to turn towards the experiences of people of color. Sometimes this is painful.

Perhaps you know that the Movement for Black Lives platform condemned US support for Israel as “complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people.”³

I will pause for a moment to say that I condemn this line of that platform.

It is painful to see this kind of language in what is a mammoth and profound document of social change. It is painful to notice real anti-Semitism on the political left and political right.

You know, Rabbi, it frustrates me that when we bring up that platform, the first, and sometimes only, thing we have to offer is condemnation. I agree, that line is just awful and false. But almost every Jewish organization that bothered to respond to the platform responded singularly to that line and no other particulars.

Is that not turning away from important issues and real struggles that Black communities in the US face?

Yes.

One of the insidious things about anti-Semitism

³ <https://policy.m4bl.org/invest-divest/>

is how it can lead us to turn away.

To withdraw.

One turning away that I regret is the way I neglected, after reading and reacting to this platform, to reach out to Jews of color.

It took me some time to consider what it might feel like for Jews of color, to first feel the pain of having the Movement For Black Lives say such damaging things about their Jewishness.

And then, what it would feel like, for so much of the Jewish world to quickly dismiss this movement, which is profoundly bringing to light the fact that implicit racial bias can be a matter of life and death.

The more I turned towards this document, the more I found a powerful, complex and needed response to racism as it exists in the world today.

I have turned towards this document because it expresses real lived experiences very different from my own. Experiences I need to turn toward.

I do not consider myself guilty, nor blame myself for the actions of some police against people of color.

But I do believe that in a free society like America

I am responsible.

We are all responsible for turning towards the disproportionate use of police violence against people of color in our country.

We have to try and understand what systems and biases must be restructured to end this pattern.

This isn't meant to make us feel guilty, but we are trying to be provocative.

The story we've told of Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights movement is now an old story. It's not just about some white people who are racist and other white people who are fighting the good fight.

We can notice, now, that even when none of us intend racism, we live in a society that is structured to promote white success and black failure and that's something we, as Jews, can and should step up to address.

We need to figure out how to talk about race in ways that are not divisive - what I mean by that is not saying: "Hey, Black people, stop yelling at us, we're the good guys," but instead, let's stop divvying ourselves up into who's racist and who's not, and figure out how to talk about this together.⁴

When Heschel marched with Dr. King, he wasn't universally praised. He and other clergy, who took on this cause, were called out for bringing "political" issues into what should be a purely religious realm.

When Heschel said that the Selma March felt like praying with his feet, it was a response to critique that he was in the wrong place on a Shabbat morning. He was responding to Jews who wanted him to keep his Judaism in shul.

⁴ This is a near-quote from Rabbi Toba Spitzer's wonderful sermon on a similar topic, *Removing the Stumbling Block: Talking About Race*. <http://dorsheitzedek.org/writings/removing-stumbling-block-talking-about-race>

Today is Yom Kippur.

Many of us come with profound internal work to do.

Rabbi Ariann and I know that a sermon that has the whiff of politics is risky,

And not because we shouldn't say hard things,
but because this is our place to be Jewish
and too often political arguments are raised
in ways that exclude and blame
and that leave some of us feeling unwelcome or unseen.
Rabbi Ariann and I take this concern seriously.

But we should remember Yom Kippur is a day
that is meant to make us uncomfortable.

When Isaiah says,
"Is this the fast I seek?"

he is making it clear -

our ritual discomfort today should remind us
of real discomfort in the world.

In this spirit we risk saying uncomfortable things.

Can we tolerate feeling uncomfortable? Notice how you're feeling right now. I think of the story of Jonah, which we'll read this afternoon - when Jonah was asked to tell Nineveh they would be destroyed, he ran away.

How can we turn toward and stay with what is uncomfortable?

How can this practice help us bravely face the pain of racism? How can it help us when dealing with all the uncomfortable work required to do *teshuva* for deep change?

Al Chet shechatanu lefanecha b'kashiut oref
For our sin of being unwilling to change.

Yom Kippur is meant to be **sufficiently** uncomfortable that we are **moved** to change.

This can be especially true when the change required of us means giving something up.

Thinking about race in the US right now requires those of us who have white privilege to examine what privilege gives us.

To consider how we might attempt to destabilize that privilege.

This can feel like a zero sum game.

But this perspective of scarcity is often an illusion. Often when it seems change requires sacrifice, we discover reward.

I recently had the chance to talk with two of Bnai Keshet's founding members **Luis and Vivian Schuchinski** about what it was like here in Montclair around 1971, as the town was in the process of planning and instituting bussing to desegregate its school district.

Vivian shared with me that it was a moment of great anxiety. Let me share with you her words:

“Suzy was in 1st or 2nd grade -

Race & Judaism Today, YK 5777, R. Ariann Weitzman & R. Elliott Tepperman
(Vivian is talking about Sue Weintraub. BK's first bat mitzvah.)

Suzy had started at Bradford
and the plan was for these kids to be bussed to Nishuane.

People were really anxious.

Up and down our block,
homes were up for sale.

We loved this town and we wanted this program to work,
but there was a fear that this could be the beginning of white flight.

The superintendent,
Walter Marks,
invited us to open our home
to talk to our neighbors about the bussing.

We agreed because we wanted to help,
but the truth is we ourselves were concerned.

So we called the new Principal at Nishuane
to discuss our concerns about bussing.
We were not against it,
but we worried about our daughter
- the bussing, the distance,
and honestly we didn't know what it would be like
for white kids at this school."

Luis described their meeting with the new Principal,
Ms. Betty Veal, who was African-American.
These are his words:

"It wasn't easy to even name or talk about racial issues at the time.
We couldn't say outright that

we are afraid to send our child to a black school.

But honestly, this was part of our fear.

Somehow, I found a way to say:

“Look, we are worried.

This is a black school and our daughter will be integrating it.”

It wasn't perfect,

but I know from talking to Ms. Veal years afterwards

that it made a difference that we named it.

Of course, her answer was perfect.

She said: “I can assure you

that your daughter will be safe, and challenged, and motivated.

You can come and see me at any time

whatever your concerns,

about anything at all.”

Her response was so comforting

that we became strong advocates for the program.

Oh and Suzy loved being bussed.

She loved her teacher and made lifelong friends that year.

The Schuchinskis' choice to embrace change

and to participate in an experiment

that challenged the way geographic segregation

leads to educational segregation,

enriched the life of their family.

Decades ago the residents of this town risked change.

Some white residents saw this as a sacrifice.

We are all beneficiaries of this risk.

I love that story.

Can we hold on to the truth of that story and also notice that there is still a significant racial achievement gap plaguing Montclair, our state, and our country? Can we notice that Montclair is still in many ways geographically and economically segregated along racial lines and that improvements in our town often come along with troubling developments for residents of color? What risks might we take *this year* to address these concerns?

Two years ago I shared Rabbi Simcha Bunem's teaching that we should carry two notes in our pockets -

on one is written: "for my sake the world was created,"

on the other: "I am dust and ashes."

I am asking us to write two different notes. On one: "I am, or my family has been, victimized by anti-semitic bias, hatred, and violence." If it applies to you, add I, or my family, have been victimized by racial bias, hatred, and violence.

On the other note, let's write something about our true experience of privilege.

On my note, it will say: "I experience tremendous privilege - as a white person, as an educated person, as an American. I am a part of a group that benefits from a complex history of subjugating others."

Most of us know both the pain of anti-semitism and what it's like to be part of a powerful majority, because most of us are also white.

And some of you hearing this have suffered from both anti-semitism and racism, can you identify as well the places where you hold privilege?

Holding these two truths - our experience of suffering and our experience of privilege - at the same time - is perhaps even harder than Reb Simcha's truths.

Like him, we have to be mindful of when we reach for each of these notes. Are we reaching too much for the victim note and failing to notice when we have power? Are we reaching too much for the privilege note and failing to notice when we are at risk? I know that I have been programmed by my own Jewish upbringing to reach too frequently for the victim note.

Heschel said that the more he studied the prophets and the deeper he came to know Jewish teachings about love and compassion for the disempowered, Teachings that there is no limit to the concern we must feel for the suffering of others, the more he came to feel that addressing racism was a primary Jewish obligation, a commandment, a *mitzvah*.

How would our lives be changed by placing anti-racism at the heart of our Jewish obligations?
What issues would we be moved to act on?
What organizations would we be moved to partner with? What would it look like to live as a Jew in public?

Rambam's measure of teshuvah is this:
when presented with new opportunities to commit the sins of the past, will we act differently?

We can, sadly, be certain
that there will be new opportunities to act on racism.
What will we do in this year?

How will we avoid the sins of *bli daat*,
sins of ignorance and blindness?
How will we acknowledge and examine our privilege?

How will we reduce *srirut* our turning away from the dynamics of race
present in our institutions and everyday life?
How will we turn towards risks to address institutional racism in our
educational, financial, and political systems?

How will replace sins of *kashiut oref*, stiff necked unwillingness to
change, with softened hearts open to the truth of another's experience?

Help us, God,
to show up as a congregation
and engage in dialogue on race.

Help us to notice
the beauty and diversity of our Jewish community.

Help us, Holy One,
to show up for communities of color!
Help us, Yah,
to educate ourselves,
to seek out new ways to learn!

Help us, Creator,
to be our most resilient
when exploring the ways racial bias or privilege
might be expressed in our own lives.

Race & Judaism Today, YK 5777, R. Ariann Weitzman & R. Elliott Tepperman

Help us to be limitless with our compassion,
turning towards the pain of racism in our world.

Let us,
Avinu Malkeinu,
open our hearts,
again and again and again