READING BY LISA GARBUS

Part 1

A few months ago, Eva, the younger of my two daughters, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. In those heavy days that followed the diagnosis, I felt shock, confusion, and deep sadness. My heart broke with each difficulty and loss ahead for Eva. One of the losses that came to me during that time was this: She will never fast on Yom Kippur. It was a strange thought and a small loss compared to others, but fasting on Yom Kippur has been a meaningful ritual for me. Then I started to think about why we fast on Yom Kippur, and I remembered a Rabbi many years ago at the Hillel at UC Berkeley, talking about how fasting is a way to try on our own death for a day. We wear white, we pray all day, we don’t eat--we are removed from our earthly lives; and from that perspective, we take a look at what it means to be alive and reflect on how we want to live.

Eva, who is eleven, might never fast on Yom Kippur, but her condition means that she is (and we are) always trying on her death. She might not fast this one day of the year, but everything she eats every day involves pausing and being aware of life and death. Every day is Yom Kippur for her.

We do a lot of counting at our house. We count grapes. Seventeen grapes have fifteen grams of carbohydrates. As do three-quarters of a cup of raspberries or blackberries, but one and a quarter cup of strawberries. We have to make sure Eva knows how much insulin she needs in order to eat those fruits and most other foods. We tell her what to do if her blood glucose is too high or too low, how to make adjustments for PE and soccer practice, and that she can’t just snack on the jelly beans she carries around with her--she has to save them in case she needs some sugar fast. We also have to talk to her about the large syringe in the red case, but that’s not really for her to use, since it’s only needed if she loses consciousness.

These are serious and scary talks Adam and I have with our daughter. But there are other talks I don’t have to give Eva. I don’t have to give her that terrifying “talk” that black parents have to give their kids about how to stay alive during an encounter with the police. As I make this move from talking about diabetes to talking about racism, I want to recognize the awkwardness of the analogy. The two topics are different in so many ways. But they are both terrible; they are both matters of life and death; and they are both about the body.

Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor--it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains it is heritage. Ta-Nehisi Coates emphasizes that racism is about the black body. The book is addressed to his fifteen-year-old son; Coates is having a difficult talk with his son. He writes, “Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body--Between the World and Me,In his recent book blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this.” (103-4).

Eva has an auto-immune disease; some of her cells attack other cells they mistakenly believe are a threat. Her body is being attacked from the inside. The bodies of black people are attacked from the outside with actual physical attacks; and they are attacked by our society with institutional and systemic inequality and oppression on so many fronts. I don’t have to talk to Eva about how to survive an encounter with the police, but I do want to talk to her about racism.

Part 2

What do I tell Eva about race? What do I tell her about our race? Do I say we’re white? Do I tell her that when I’m filling out a form, and I have to check a box for race, I hesitate? Do I tell her that I’m tempted to check “other” because I’m white but I’m also Jewish?

Do I tell Eva that Jews in this country have historically faced discrimination, oppression and violence; but we currently benefit from being white and from being perceived as white in a racist society? Do I then talk about the exceptions to this - the anti-Semitism that still exists, the white-supremacists who marched in Charlottesville, whose definition of white does not include us?

Do I remind my daughter that as Jews, we know about being foreign and other and living in a diaspora? That we know the experience of murderous hatred directed at us? Do I remind her of Zippy, Itzy-Mayer, beautiful Chana-leh and all her other relatives killed in the Holocaust? Do I mention the reparations payments that survivors, including my mother and grandparents, received for years from the German government? That money did not make up for their losses, but it was an official gesture in that direction, an attempt at tshuva.

Do I tell Eva that unlike Germany, the US has not gone through any official process of tshuva for the sin of slavery? And that without that tshuva, we keep repeating the sin with Jim Crow, lynchings, Confederate monuments, a racist justice system, mass incarceration, education and health care inequities, voting restrictions, employment and housing discrimination, police brutality and murder?

There are other things I could tell my daughter, assuming she’s still listening, assuming she doesn’t say, “Mom, can we please talk about something else now?”

These next things may be harder for me to say. Do I tell her that at times it has been easier for me to assume the role of victim - to say that I too was done wrong as a Jew - than to see and say that as a white person, I am part of and have benefitted from an unjust and unequal system? A system that has done grievous harm to others. Do I tell Eva that the injustices perpetrated against me and my family as Jews have made me sensitive about injustice towards others, but they have also shielded me from having to face my own position of power?

Part 3

When Eva was in preschool, her class learned about the Civil Rights movement around one Martin Luther King Day holiday. She was thinking about the lesson some time later, but couldn’t remember all the details.

“Mommy,” she asked me, “was it the white people who were mean to the black people, or the black people who were mean to the white people?”

A part of me didn’t want to answer. I wanted to freeze time, so she could forever be four years old and innocent. I also let myself imagine a world where to find the answer to that question, we would have to consult a history book.

“Mommy, you didn’t answer my question.”

It was the white people who were mean to the black people. And sometimes we still are.

Part 4

I grew up in New Orleans. We moved there when I was five and I left for college at seventeen. Although it was the 1970’s and early 80’s, slavery and its immediate aftermath did not feel very distant. Black and white were seemingly unshakable markers of class and power and value. I absorbed the messages around me that worked to keep those divisions in place.

When I was around Eva’s age, we moved from the suburbs into the city, and in the middle of 7th grade, I switched schools from a mostly-all-white suburban school to a mostly-all-black inner city school. That move shook up my racial consciousness, as I came into daily contact with black kids and got to know some of their families. In most of those families, as in mine, the father was absent, so I didn’t have a chance to meet black men.

My heart would pound with fear when I passed a black man on the street, and then I would try to talk myself out of the racism that was lodged in my body.

It has taken some work to find an antidote to that mistrust and fear; it has taken teaching at the Prison University Project at San Quentin; it has taken some more education, some new relationships, some wading into awkward and difficult places.

Part 5

In 1963, James Baldwin wrote a letter to his 15-year-old nephew. It’s called, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the 100th Anniversary of the Emancipation.” Baldwin tells his nephew: “You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you are a worthless human being. . . By a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents [he means, ironically, white people, because we believe ourselves innocent--those innocents] who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But those men are your brothers--your lost younger brothers. And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. . . You know and I know that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free.”

We are not yet free. We need “to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.” Yom Kippur is a good time to start.