

“Get Up, Stand Up, Stand Up for Everyone’s Rights”

Yom Kippur 5781

Imagine for a moment that you are a person living in another country, a country filled with violence and danger, a place where the government is creating laws that suppress your rights each and every day. Imagine that you and your family are faced with prejudice and anger every day, only because of your religious beliefs, your background, your “disloyalty” to the country. Imagine that you made the brave decision to leave the country, the only home you’ve ever known, to escape to safety. You pack all of your things, you head to the train station because this is where you were told to go, you board a train that is hopefully taking you to a better life, and you wait.

You venture through other landscapes, you endure extreme desert heat, you travel all night and day, hoping beyond all hope that safety was on the other side. You arrive, only to be pushed off the train, forced to march in groups, and then you’re hustled into an over-crowded, unsanitary, frightening camp. The women in one location, the men in another, children torn from your arms, never sure if you’re going to see your family again. You find out how this place works, you keep your head down, you do your best to contact the outside world, but all you can do is wait.

You know there is a doctor you can approach if you need help. So, one day you find yourself in need of medical care and make a plan to see this doctor. He smiles at you, reassures you that everything will be ok. He takes you under his protective wing and tells you an operation is necessary. You’re in a different country, you don’t know any better, you go with the doctor. You wake to find that all of your reproductive organs have been removed, without your consent, without previous knowledge this would occur, without any real need for this procedure. You grieve, you mourn, you cry, you sit and do nothing, because there is nothing for you to do, but wait.

This story seems like something out of a nightmare, something that too many experienced decades ago when Jews were forced to endure devastating medical experiments during the Holocaust. And yet, this horrifying tale was actually a description of the current situation many women found themselves in while serving

time at an U.S. Immigration and Custom's Enforcement Camp in Ocilla, Georgia. This is something that happened and IS happening right now, in our country.

For years, we have uttered the words, "Never Forget" and "Never Again," praying, hoping, and acting against the pervasive racism and xenophobia that brought about World War II. We have said these words to prevent further discrimination, to keep people in our country and around the world safe. However, despite all of our efforts, these atrocities are happening in our own backyard. And even beyond this terrifying situation, the racism so evident in this situation continues to explode into our society, seeping into every crack and crevice of our world.

For many of us, we look at images of the civil rights movement, images of the Holocaust, images from other countries and feel nothing but disbelief that in 2020, so many of those stories are coming to life again. Our stomachs churn when we read about the murder of another unarmed Person of Color. Our hearts sink when we read about the parents and children who remain separated in detention centers around the country. Our jaws open wide in shock when people call the police to complain about families or groups of People of Color going about their every day lives. For anyone who thinks that racism isn't a problem in our country, think again. It's unfortunately alive and well.

And so, each and every year, the Jewish people come together to prayer, to offer words of reflection and apology, to make amends and promises to do better, to be better, both for ourselves, and for the entire world. We say these words to hopefully inspire action, and reaction to what's going on around us. We participate in a communal and personal *Vidui*, an outward confession of sins, an alphabet of woes and a lengthy list of wrongdoings. During a year that felt filled with troubles and anger, deep sadness and despair, reciting sin after sin feels uncomfortable, disturbing, and often-times, downright painful. And yet, we confess. We confess to sins we didn't do. We confess to sins we didn't *know* we did. We confess to sins we *think* we didn't do. And, we confess, knowing that we did it, and we hope not to do it again, but also knowing there is a strong chance it will happen once more. We confess, we pray, we try to be better.

For all of those sins mentioned, and those unsaid, this year I offer a communal *Vidui* written by HUC-JIR student Samantha Thal, for the wrongs we've committed, whether intentionally or not.

Ashamnu...

We have **a**bstained from uncomfortable growth.

We have **b**elittled the pain of our fellow humans.

We have **c**omplied with social pressures.

We have **d**esensitized ourselves to the suffering of others.

...For all these sins, may we earn forgiveness, through our actions, through our learning, through our change of heart.

It isn't enough to say the words. It isn't enough to read the headlines and shake our heads in frustration. It isn't even enough to hope and pray that people will open their eyes, their hearts, their minds and truly see what is happening. We must move beyond the words to action. We must stand up and say that **this is not ok**. We must sit in our discomfort, knowing what we've done wrong, accepting it, confessing it, learning from it, and fixing it. We must know that even though we as Jews uphold that all people, all human beings are valuable, we have not done our part to end racism, even within our walls. Our *vidui* continues with some excerpts of a passage written by Yavilah McCoy. You will find these words available in the slideshow, or on the screen. Please, join with me:

Al Chet...

For the sins we have committed through conscious and unconscious racial bias. For the sins we have committed through hardening our hearts to the need for change. For the sins of colluding with racism both openly and secretly. For the sins we have committed through uttering racist words. For the sins we have committed through acts of racial micro-aggression. For the sins we have committed through the denial of the *tzelem elohim* (the divine spark) within Black bodies. For the sins we have committed in deceiving others by not teaching our children the worth and value of Black people in Jewish space. For the sins we have committed in not honoring and protecting the journeys of Black elders and

Black children in Jewish space. For the sins we have committed in exploiting Black people and Black bodies in our business dealings. For the sins we have committed in not caring for the ways that race and class intersect in our effort to welcome Black people in Jewish space. **For all these, we seek pardon, forgiveness and atonement.**

For the sins we have committed through confessing our commitments to ending racism insincerely. For the sins we have committed that desecrate the divine name by allowing White Supremacy to shape and determine our practice of Judaism. For the sins of racism that we have committed knowingly and unknowingly that continue to do damage to our siblings, children, families and community. For the sins of racism we have committed through creating hierarchies of value between our siblings from Europe and those from the Middle East and Africa. For the sins of racism we have committed through engaging in foolish racial talk and gossip in our places of worship. For the sins of racism we have committed through haughty demeanor and proud looks. For the sins of racism we have committed through the glances of our eyes. For the sins of racism we have committed through passing judgement. For the sins of racism that we have committed through baseless hatred. For the sins of racism that we have committed through turning a blind-eye to pain and suffering around us. For the sins of racism that we have committed by not seeing racism as an evil among us. For the sins of racism that we have committed by not committing to end it. **For all these, we seek pardon, forgiveness, and atonement.**

Today, on this sacred day of atonement, we begin the difficult process of changing. We start the new year fresh, ready to embrace the discomfort of knowing we have more work to do. We carry the pain of our own history in our souls, while new pain is added each and every day, the pain of our siblings suffering around our country. We carry the pain of the human lives sitting in ICE detention centers, separated from their children, worrying that unnecessary and invasive medical procedures will be performed on them. We carry the pain of the People of Color who wonder if today will be the last time they go for that run in their neighborhood, or walk to the corner store for a treat, or go to sleep in their bed. We carry the pain of any person who leaves their home knowing that

the color of their skin, or their country of origin will bring angry, hateful, spiteful words hurled at them.

As Jews, as human beings, we have an obligation to do better, to treat every single person with equity, with justice, with respect. Our ancient sages preached this when they said in Midrash, “God created humanity from the four corners of the earth - yellow clay, and white sand, black loam, and red soil. Therefore, the earth can declare to no part of humanity that it does not belong here, that this soil is not their rightful home” (Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer 1:1).

What can we do? How can we address this ever-growing problem, this plague that is sweeping through our nation? We start by listening. We learn from those who have experienced this pain. Our Social Action Committee just completed a pilot program called “Chavuration Circles.” This program invited CBI members to take part in difficult, important, and crucial conversations with leaders from our own community, conversations about race, racism, and how to be truly anti-racist. This program will be brought to the congregation on a bigger scale in the coming weeks. Plan to be a part of this. Plan to continue your own learning, your own education.

You can participate in our online MLK Social Justice Seminar this year. During the Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, CBI and Temple Beth Shalom will host our fourth-annual social justice seminar, this year focusing on Jews of Color. Two years ago, we learned about the experience of People of Color in Austin, issues of racial injustice, and how we can be better. Well, we need to start that work here in our own building. Plan to continue your learning through this important weekend.

And, you can join the fight. Stand up against racism in our community and around the country. Just as our Social Action Committee actively participates in bringing education to our community about how to be anti-racist, we also work with local and national organizations to support immigrants in our city and state. This work helps to fight against the racism that too many of our nation’s newest residents face when they cross our border. You can help provide needed resources to these individuals, and you can find out about ongoing and upcoming opportunities for advocacy. We can work together

to fight racism through education, through direct service, and most especially, through advocacy. If you speak out against racism, you become part of the fight.

The great philosopher Lao Tzu once said:

“Watch your thoughts; they become words.

Watch your words; they become actions.

Watch your actions; they become habit.

Watch your habits; they become character.

Watch your character; it becomes your destiny”

Our destiny it to stand up and affect real change. We begin that process by learning, learning more about ourselves and our own biases, learning about the experience of others, learning how to be an ally, a partner, a voice for the voiceless. We can and will make the world a better, safer, equitable place. I leave you with the immortal words of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg:

"Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time." Let that change begin here, today, with all of us. Amen.