

Caves and Race – Rosh Hashanah Morning
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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I love open school night at my kid's school. George M. Davis Elementary is a demographic mirror of New Rochelle. Sitting in Talia's kindergarten classroom with the parents of her classmates, I marveled at the diversity. You see, working at a synagogue leaves me quite sheltered. I spend my days within a rather narrow band of the socio-economic spectrum. But my kids. In their classes: white, black, Asian, Indian, Hispanic, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and for three year's running in Lev's class, a Sikh. I look at that school, watch the kids on the playground, hear my kids talk about their friends, and it makes me feel good, hopeful. I need that because when I turn on the TV that is not what I see. When I look at my Facebook feed, I see protests and marches. I see unarmed black men lying dead in the street. I see police captains choked up, unable to find the words to express regret, to explain good intentions gone wrong. I see pundits trying to tell other people how to feel, trying to tell them that their truth is somehow false. Despite having the first black president, despite the great legal gains made over the years, there is still serious racial discrimination in America today. And most of us just don't get it.

It is tempting to think that we can understand being black in America because of our shared humanity. But, as the Talmud warns: "Do judge your fellow עד שתגיע למקומו" until you arrive in his place."¹ I have never had people cross the street to avoid walking next to me. I have never had a security guard follow me around a store. I've never felt endangered because of my racial or religious group. Without these experiences, we cannot understand the reality of discrimination against over forty million black Americans.

The reactions to police killings of unarmed black men have brought feelings of prejudice and fear to the surface in the black community. The whole nation witnesses these deaths as videos on Facebook, as vivid pictures on the nightly news. We cannot avoid the violence of these confrontations. We cannot avoid bearing witness to the pain that they bring out expressed by protests and marches in cities across America. We can plainly see the heartache in our country. We can see communities of color that feel disempowered, that feel scared, that feel threatened.

Before continuing, I must address a false dichotomy that has become part of the narrative about race. A simple dichotomy between "Black Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter" must be rejected out of hand. The ancient rabbis taught that any Torah verse can have more than one true interpretation, even contradictory truths. The same is true with the complex racial dynamics facing 21st century America. A simple, split-screen, 2-sided perspective glosses over the complexities of the issues. Similarly, saying "All Lives Matter" does not suffice. There exist real issues for both the African American community and the good police officers who work hard to protect us each and every day. Slogans like "All Lives Matter" do not address the distinct and valid issues represented by each slogan. Instead, saying "All Lives Matter" denies the unique needs that we must confront as a society, the ethical challenges facing our nation.

¹ Pirkei Avot 5:2

The spiritual basis for Jewish ethics lies in our creation story from Genesis: “And God created man in His image, **בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים** in the image of God He created him; male and female God created them.”² There is a Divine spark in each person. This radical idea means that the people we can stand least, the people we fear most, have something that makes them worthy of respect, even awe. Racial discrimination has no place in that ethical framework.

And still, despite The West’s commitment to so-called Judeo-Christian values, we look around and see bias and discrimination systemic in every society on earth. In Israel, here in the US, in Europe, we see groups of people behave as if they have the unique right to privileges and opportunities. Jewish tradition rejects this sort of elitism. “Why did God create only one person?” the Talmud asks. It then answers “All people are descended from a single human being, Adam, so that no one can say, ‘My ancestor is worthier than yours.’”³ This powerful statement of fundamental equality clearly forbids explicit elitism and prejudice. It then challenges us to go further, to look within to find the ways we might implicitly separate ourselves from those who are not like us. Do we contribute, in even subtle ways, to the small discriminations and micro-aggressions which, taken in the aggregate, contribute to discrimination in our country?

Doubt that there is significant discrimination? A few examples: According to Forbes, the typical black household has just 6% of the wealth of the typical white household.⁴ The fact that this wealth gap exists for such a large segment of the black community demonstrates a systemic problem rather than one of personal enterprise or effort. The lack of wealth traces, in part, to embarrassing educational disparities. According to a study reviewed in The Atlantic, “At any given poverty level, school districts that have a higher proportion of white students get substantially higher funding than districts that have more minority students.”⁵ In 2016, how can we allow for an education system that invests more in white children than in black children?

How do we get to a more equal world? It will take sacrifice. Any change that shifts a society takes effort and requires the powerful to give up some power, the wealthy to give up some wealth, the elite to take one step down so that all can be raised up. But first, each of us needs to open our eyes to reality.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Asher Knight, compares this to a trial faced by the prophet Elijah. Elijah has the audacity to question the authority of the evil Queen Jezebel. She flies into a murderous rage so he flees to a cave on the side of Mount Horev in the Sinai wilderness. The cave is a safe place for him. It isolates him from the tumult outside. He feels secure, protected by the solid walls around him. But soon, God commands him to come out of the safety of the cave, to stand upon the mountain. The Bible then recounts: “There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks.... but Adonai was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire—a Still Small Voice.”⁶

² Genesis 1:27

³ Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5

⁴ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/laurashin/2015/03/26/the-racial-wealth-gap-why-a-typical-white-household-has-16-times-the-wealth-of-a-black-one/#63466e3c6c5b>

⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/public-school-funding-and-the-role-of-race/408085/>

⁶ 1 Kings 19:1-21

Many of us live in that cave. We go about our daily lives surrounded by walls of comfort, privilege, and status that we have worked hard to achieve. We can easily go for long stretches of time without encountering any threat, prejudice, or discomfort. But our caves blinds us to the reality of our society. They it shield our eyes from the real racial discrimination in our country. Like Elijah, if we are to answer God's call, we must leave the cave, we must be brave enough to feel the winds of discontent, to feel the ground of our nation shift beneath the weight of inequality, to see the fires that rage in protests in our great cities. And then we must open our ears within that din to hear the truth of other people's pain and the Still Small Voice that lies within.

And still, even when we leave the cave we will face a reality experienced by the black community that most of us cannot begin to comprehend. In his astonishing and troubling book, writer, journalist and educator Ta-Nehisi Coates, frames the situation of the black man in strikingly physical, visceral ways. He writes that besides African-American nightclubs, "black people control nothing, least of all the fate of their bodies, which could be commandeered by the police; which could be erased by the guns...; which could be raped, beaten, jailed." This is a reality so far removed from anything that I know, so far from what most of us in this room can conceive. That distance makes it tempting to utterly reject this striking perspective. To say, "That is not the America that I know and love so it must be wrong." And still the streets of our cities fill with protests. This is the truth of a large part of America, a truth more easily dismissed than faced. Will we deny the truth of another, tell them they're wrong? Or, will we work to understand their truth as best we can and put in the effort to change our society?

The Torah famously teaches, "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כַּמּוֹדֶךָ: Love your neighbor as yourself."⁷ If we felt that we'd lost control of our bodies, we would want others to come out of their caves for us. Ours is a blessed generation of Jews. But, we have short memories. For 2,000 years we faced not only periodic atrocities, but constant, quiet oppression, daily degradation, and millennia of grinding prejudice that left our ancestors with a constant feeling of insecurity. The analogy is not perfect, history makes that impossible. But, perhaps we can use this memory from our collective history as a prism, a lens to might allow us some insight, a bit of kinship with those who live with discrimination in America today.

I do not know the answers to the complex problems of racial discrimination. But I do know that, as Jews, we have an obligation to work on them. The Jerusalem Talmud teaches: "When Jews and non-Jews live together in a community, they collect tzedakah together, they administer it together, and they give to Jew and non-Jew alike, for the sake of peace in their community."⁸ In other words, we are all in this together. When one member of our society feels pain, we should feel pain. When one member of our society experiences discrimination, we all should feel discriminated against.

This is America. This is the land of endless potential, a nation that has experience rising above injustice and raising up those who are low. If any society can overcome this challenge, it is us.

⁷ Leviticus 19:18

⁸ Jerusalem Talmud, Demai 24a

Besides keeping informed what can we do? Two things come to mind. First, on Sunday afternoon, October 30th, we will host a multi-faith service organized and sponsored by the American Jewish Committee. This will be the fifth multi-faith gathering of Catholics, Ethical Culture, Mormons, Muslims, Jews and Protestants, in praise and song, and learning and prayer. Will will spread love and reconciliation among our faith traditions. Included in the group are several black churches from around Westchester. Come to hear our joint testimony of love.

The other thing we can do is more simple and perhaps more powerful. It seems trite to say, but it is true: We have to start at home. We should watch for casual racism in our words and our jokes. We should watch how we interact with all people who are somehow different than us. We should treat everyone with respect, as an equal, whether our neighbor or the person who mows our lawn or checks us out at CVS. Too often our position, our title, our role as customer causes us to see other human beings as means to an end, as a service provider to be critiqued rather than as a human with dignity and a Divine spark. Little acts of kindness and respect can ripple through our society to make a tidal wave of change, a wave that will quiet the waters stirred by discrimination.

Like Elijah, we did not create the caves in which we stand. We did not carve the walls that separate us from our neighbors, that block out the problems of racial discrimination in our country. It is easy to stand in the safety of our caves. But if we do not let the events around us touch our hearts, we may become complicit in that which we denounce. If we are one nation under God than we each bear at least part of the responsibility for any act of discrimination, any act of unfairly applied justice. In this New Year, may we step out of our caves, sense the wind, feel the earthquake, and see the fire. And then let us hear and follow the Still Small Voice and lead our community and our nation to a place of healing, forgiveness and redemption.

כִּן יְהִי רָצוֹן

May This Be God's Will