

Rabbi Amy Sapowith's Message
With an Eye Toward the Future
Yom Kippur 5778

"[T]he thing I like about [carving in stone] is there ain't no second chances," says sculptor Bob Bouquet.ⁱ No second chances. Hmmm. During this High Holy Day season, the season of second chances, that comment caught my attention. Especially since residents in many southern cities, including here in Leesburg, are debating the fate of confederate sculptures. These statues made more often of bronze than of stone dot our town parks, government courtyards and sacred spaces, and are the subject of much controversy. The debate, though painful, is giving America a second chance to atone for the past sin of slavery and to make clear which values of southern culture in particular, and American culture more broadly, are enduring.

Recently, the VA division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans among other plaintiffs filed a suit against the city of Charlottesville to block the city from removing the statues of two confederate generals: Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. "One of the plaintiffs, B. Frank Earnest, referring to his many Confederate-soldier ancestors, said in an interview, 'this is all about family. . . . 'To Northerners in the 1860's...the Civil War 'was like Afghanistan,' meaning a far-off conflict, while to Southerners, 'it was about defending our towns, our homes.' 'This is about punishing us for our ancestors.'"ⁱⁱ

"Punishing us for our ancestors." This statement struck a chord. For the record—my southern ancestry is limited to my father, zichrono livracha, who was born and raised in Wilmington, DE, in the 1920s and 30s. But even his parents were raised in Pennsylvania, and I am a Bostonian by birth. Yankee all the way except

when it comes to baseball. Sites and figures of the American revolutionary war loomed large. John and Abigail Adams, Paul Revere, these are my homies. As far as the civil war, that was the war to end slavery—that reprehensible peculiar institution. Robert E. Lee? Stonewall Jackson? They are figures who don't evoke a lot of passion from me. And yet amidst the heated debates and anguish around the fate of the confederate statues that statement, "This is about punishing us for our ancestors" struck a chord. Why?

Because as liberal Jews, by which I mean Jewish movements that embrace Enlightenment ideals, we are regularly criticized for "punishing our ancestors," by which I mean turning away from or overturning established Jewish tradition. Most recently, Jerusalem's chief Sephardic rabbi Shlomo Amar accused Reform Jews of being worse than Holocaust deniers for advocating for a mixed gender prayer space at the Western Wall. The logic? Because the Talmud, the legacy of our ancestors, clearly indicates the ancient temple had a women's section, so to advocate for a mixed prayer space is equivalent to denying Torah—and denying Torah is worse than denying the Holocaust. Of course, we do not see advocating for a mixed prayer space as denying Torah—we see it as revealing Torah. For as we understand more and more about gender, about sexuality, about distraction; as men take responsibility for their own attractions rather than project them onto women, demanding women refrain from singing and remain out of sight during prayer, and as women are taken seriously as leaders of our Jewish communities we in the liberal Jewish world have opened ourselves up to new ways of worshipping. As Reform Jews we are Janus-faced—we respect the past as a teacher for the present, but we

look toward the future for the answers to our prayers. And I thought, perhaps the way we as Jews have regarded our ancestors and have handled change may be instructive for how to approach the sensitive issue of the fate of the confederate statues. So, for example:

When we say the avot/imahot prayer (p. 309 in Gates of Repentance for reference) we are according our ancestors our respect—for everything they got right in their lives. For risking their livelihoods to found a moral religion, to create a spirituality and a society based on laws that transcend the whims and prejudices of any single individual, to demand that our leaders be subject to the same laws, to establish a prophetic tradition that empowers a person to speak truth to power and still live to see the next day, and to enlist the mind as well as the heart in the service of truth, which has allowed for Jews to become not only admirable mensches but also great performers, scientists, scholars and leaders in many fields. That prayer calls upon the merit of our ancestors to confer merit on us, and those seven ancestors: Abraham, Sarah, Rebecca, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel and Leah represent all the subsequent ancestors right up until our own day. Zichronam l'vracha. May their memories always be for a blessing.

That said, we also acknowledge the things that they got wrong. When we detect an injustice within our tradition, we have a number of different approaches at our disposal for redressing it. These approaches may help us think about the choices being debated today in our town halls over the fate of our confederate ancestors.

One form of redress is to seal up the offending tradition so that it is rendered powerless. An example of this is the case of the rebellious son mentioned in the Book of Deuteronomy. The law described there would require us to stone sons who drank, caroused and were otherwise deemed malfeasant and refractory. The rabbis were put off by the harshness of this decree. They argued that this law was never enforced and to ensure that it never would be in the future, they set up all kinds of conditions that had to be met before a son could qualify as rebellious. By making the burden of proof so onerous, the rabbis effectively annulled the force of this law handed down from Sinai. This approach is called “uprooting a provision of the Torah” and is an accepted rabbinic practice.ⁱⁱⁱ The law of the rebellious son offended their sense of justice and they were empowered to render it moot. Nevertheless, it is read every year in Torah and serves as a warning to young and rowdy men.

Another form of redress eliminates language that has become outdated or is deemed offensive. In the newest version of Plaut’s Torah Commentary published in 2005, and which we do not own, God is no longer referred to as Lord or “He” but rather as Eternal because it is gender neutral, does not conjure a male superior, and captures the transcendent quality of the divine. Similarly, last year, the newest prayer book for the conservative movement, *Lev Shalem*, replaced the word “King” with “sovereign”. Rabbi Edward Feld, the senior editor explained, “Language changes so quickly in our time, there are words that you can’t say anymore and be understood. Every generation will need their own prayer book.”^{iv}

A further example of removing offensive language is found in the morning blessings. The orthodox liturgy includes the language: “Praised be God for not

making me a woman.” Reform liturgists replaced this with: “Praised be God who made me in the image of God.”

So, we give credit to our ancestors where credit is due. We offer critiques where they are needed. By way of critique, we wall up traditions that offend our sense of justice and render them moot. We replace outdated and offensive language. And a third approach is to add to existing customs.

One example of adding to customs is the Avot v’Imahot prayer mentioned earlier. We don’t have to replace our male ancestors in order to make visible and honor our female ones. So in the 1970s, various informal havurot began adding the Imahot (the mothers) to the Avot (the fathers) to get the Avot v’Imahot prayer we prayed together on p. 309. By the early 2000s all the liberal movements had published a prayer book with the imahot—but not without push back. Current editions of the conservative prayer books include two versions of this prayer side by side—one with the additions, one without.

Another example of “adding to” occurs in some modern orthodox congregations, where the traditional minyan or quorum of ten Jews necessary for a prayer service has been expanded to a minimum of twenty. Not any mix of twenty Jews but specifically ten Jewish men and ten Jewish women. Obviously you need quite a dependable cadre of prayer-goers to meet that quorum.

One of the most rancorous attempts to add to our tradition is the recent effort on behalf of the various bodies of liberal Judaism to establish an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Recall that this is what sparked the offensive comment from the chief Sephardi rabbi in Jerusalem about Reform Jews.

After years of negotiations with Jewish leaders an agreement for an egalitarian prayer space was finally reached with the Israeli government in January of last year. Three months ago, in late June, however, the Israeli government under pressure from its ultra-orthodox wing suspended the plan altogether. This renegeing after a year and a half of stonewalling has created the greatest rift between Israel and the majority of Jews in America in recent times. Some say it threatens the very unity of the Jewish people. So “adding to”, while it seems an approach that would offer the most compromise, can also threaten the greatest divide if the parties you are dealing with are unyielding.

Some Jews think we dishonor and betray our ancestors, and our God, by our willingness to revisit and revise Jewish tradition. Our very openness to the future threatens their worship of the past. But religion is a living thing and traditions must evolve. So too in our own country.

One solution debated in town halls across the south is to add sculptures that would contextualize and critique the monuments of confederate military figures; statues that would honor slaves, abolitionists and other African American luminaries. Loudoun Supervisor Geary Higgins advocates for this approach. “I don’t believe that we should be taking down monuments. I think we should be putting up other monuments to tell the whole story.”^v This makes sense if their presence testifies to something upstanding and conveys values we want to uphold. If we could clarify these values, then adding statues that give a more complete picture would be like adding the Imahot to the Amidah prayer or adding the ten women to the prayer minyan—an addition that more fully expresses the story that is there.

But what *are* the values that Generals Lee and Jackson represent? Family? Ancestry, as the plaintiff, Frank B. Earnest claims? Can we give these ancestors a second chance? Would contextualizing them make them more sympathetic or would we be vicariously re-enacting the civil war only this time with bronze pieces in our public spaces?

A Leesburg resident weighed in saying, “Nowadays it’s not enough to acknowledge and confess our sins of the past. It seems we must eliminate anything that reminds us of them.”^{vi} What I understand from this perspective is that the monuments would serve as a confession. We look up at these confederate statues and we are supposed to hear remorse, feel our country’s shame, and perhaps be moved to redeem our history by redoubling our efforts to eliminate the remnants of racism that continue to plague our society. Could this be what they are saying? Monuments do undergo changes of interpretation.

Take the Arch of Titus, erected in Rome in 81 CE, for example. This arch commemorates the conquests of Titus, including the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, and is an example of a monument whose meanings were multiple and shifted over time. . . . For Jews, the arch was principally a symbol of our defeat and our exile from Jerusalem. Some, however, took solace in the arch by claiming that its magnificence was proof that Israel had once been a “powerful nation” and “formidable foe.”^{vii} Compare this to a statement by another Leesburg resident regarding the confederate soldier under debate, “To walk past the courthouse that celebrates people who fought for folks like me to be treated as property is a smack in the face every day. It sends the wrong message to people who expect to be treated fairly

here, and it sends a message to folks who think, that, because of the color of their skin, they should be treated differently in our country.”^{viii} So while the meaning of monuments may shift with time and perspective, what solace really do the confederate monuments offer this resident? A confession? Our shame? Or is it still a slap in the face?

The first Leesburg resident quoted, also likened the removal of the statue to the Taliban’s destruction of the Buddhist statues in Afghanistan. But removal is not the same as destruction. To physically remove these sculptures and place them in private homes or in museums as is being proposed gives a second life to these monuments, testaments to a bygone age whose preservation can be enlisted in the effort to educate our society towards greater equality. This would be like sequestering the law of the rebellious son because it no longer, if it ever, represented justice. It would also be like replacing the morning blessing, “Thank God for not making me a woman,” which many Jews experienced as a disparaging formulation and a daily slap in the face. The rebellious son is still found in Torah and the original daily blessing is still found in Orthodox liturgy should one want to visit them.

But destroying the image altogether is also an option. “Of all the Confederate monuments under fire, few are more figuratively weighted—and literally fixed—than the 1,700-foot-high outcropping of granite outside Atlanta with carvings of Robert E. Lee, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and Jefferson Davis. . . . It is reportedly the largest flat relief sculpture in the world, conceived by Southern Confederate groups a century ago.”^{ix} The same debate rages here: add to or remove. Only here,

removal does indeed mean destroy. “It’s the side of a mountain. You either destroy it or leave it in place.”^x The stakes are higher here. Less room for compromise. So to help think through this final example, I want to bring in a story about the second century sage Rabbi Akiva. Akiva began his Torah study at the age of forty, rose rapidly within the ranks of the rabbinic academy to eventually rival the authority of even his teachers, the great sages Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. Here’s the story:

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: “I will tell you a parable to explain what [Rabbi Akiva’s relationship to his teachers] is like. . . Once a stonecutter took his axe and sat on the side of a mountain and began chipping away tiny stones. People came by and asked him: ‘What are you doing?’

He said to them: ‘Look, I am uprooting this mountain and throwing it into the Jordan River.’

“They said to him: ‘You can’t uproot an entire mountain!’”

“But he continued chipping away at the mountain until he came to a large rock. He crawled under it, broke it, uprooted it, and flung it into the Jordan, saying to it: ‘This is not your place—that is!’

“This is what Rabbi Akiva did to [his teachers] Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua.”^{xi} The story ends there, but I will continue.

Rabbis Eliezer and Joshua are considered rabbinic mountains in our tradition—towering Sages whose authority is monumental, unchallenged even, until Akiva. Akiva arrives and with time and study overturned their authority. He was able to see truths that they could not see. Answer questions they could not answer. Whether through his unique life experiences or his exceptional intellect or his

mystical insight—Akiva has an understanding of Torah compelling and persistent enough to uproot even something as solid, weighty and as revered as the reputations of two great rabbinic masters. Akiva scholar, Barry Holtz, calls this dynamic “optimistic.” Why optimistic? Because it expresses “a fundamental faith in the unending richness of the Torah.”^{xii} The ability to dislodge even mountains is what promises to keep the truth of Torah vital and relevant. All the more so, then, should our nation’s compelling and persistent striving for justice uproot the statues or rock faces of Confederate leaders to the extent that they are deemed symbols of injustice. This overturning would also be optimistic. It expresses a fundamental faith in the unending richness of American institutions while proving that the arc of history bends toward justice.

And so we return to the original questions. Are our confederate statues, the center of much controversy, meant to express American values, and if so, which ones? Are they intended to honor historical figures, and if so, for what? Are they intended to honor or to shame? Are they a celebration or a confession? How many people must feel slapped in the face before they are perceived to be an insult? Is it possible for a statue to outlive its time in the sun and cede its place to other figures or ideals deserving recognition? Is it time for these mountains to be uprooted?

If we were to allow Jewish tradition to guide us, we would need to consider the options: to sequester, to remove, to replace, to add to, or to chip away, examples of each abide in our tradition. A vote would be taken. The majority opinion would rule and the minority opinion would be recorded. For Jews, this is a season of self-reflection, atonement and forgiveness. At the same time our nation is reflecting on

and debating what we as a nation stand for. Through whatever paths are chosen, let us carve through the rock that is prejudice and racial hatred. Let's make it clear and unambiguous that white supremacy and racism of any sort are unacceptable. For our hearts can be of stone. In Torah, hearts of stone are related to Pharaoh, to stubbornness, to lack of compassion, and ultimately to folly and loss of life. Yet if mountains can be dislodged piece by tiny piece, hearts too can be moved—by the suffering of others, by the shame of the peculiar institution of slavery and of Jim Crow, by the recognition that our country's original sin has not yet been fully atoned or redeemed. Healing comes slowly. In some respects, too slowly.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis asserts, "You *can* change your past. . . .No, you cannot change what happened. You can change only your emotional relationship to what happened. And it might very well be the hardest thing you ever try to do."^{xiii} Do the confederate monuments in our public spaces—in so many public spaces—help us to change our emotional relationship to our nation's history? Do they help us atone? Or do they hinder us? If the concern of the "Lost Cause" Movement is to preserve symbols of southern honor, states rights, and family, are these the best symbols to represent that? What about statues of Booker T. Washington and Mark Twain? William Faulkner and Charles Chestnut? Flannery O'Connor and Zora Neale Hurston?

Respecting our ancestors might be one of the values we want to preserve through this current struggle. But racial supremacy is not. Let us remember in ways that are appropriate, our slave-owning ancestors for the good in their lives, and our

confederate ancestors, who by and large were not wealthy enough to own slaves, for the good in their lives.

Just as the authority that the Sages, Eliezer and Joshua, had wielded was overturned, so too can the authority of these past greats: Lee and Jackson, be overturned. This may be just what healing the wound, the crime and the abuse of slavery demands—a chipping away at the authority of past greats until they are dislodged. Reconstructionist and Reform Jews often take the lead in breaking with the past. Not because we don't respect history, but because we respect the future just as much.

And what would the great Rabbi Akiva say, the one who dislodged mountains? The one who overturned his teachers? "Love your neighbor as yourself. This is the great principle of the Torah."^{xiv} This is also the challenge for our nation. Let us love and honor and give overdue credit to our American ancestors—our African American ancestors--on whose backs a cornerstone of our society was built.

ⁱ "Sculptor Finds his voice in stone," Allison Brophy Champion, *Washington Times*, 8/20/17.

ⁱⁱ "Battle over Confederate Statues enters Va. Courtroom," Paul Duggan, *Washington Post*, 9/2/17.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Evolving Halakhah*, Rabbi Dr. Moshe Zemer, 14.

^{iv} "A Way to Pray Today," Sam Kestenbaum, *Forward*, 2/26/16.

^v "No action on statue, for now," Jim Barnes, *Washington Post*, 9/24/17.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} "From Rome to Charlottesville, a statue is never just a statue," Steven Fine, *Washington Jewish Week*, 9/7/17.

^{viii} "No action on statue, for now," Jim Barnes, *Washington Post*, 9/24/17.

^{ix} "Ugly past, unattractive present for biggest Confederate Monument," Steve Hendrix, *Washington Post*, 9/20/17.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, Version A, chapter 6 cited in *Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud*, Barry W. Holtz, 47-8.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 49-50.

^{xiii} *Mishkan Hanefesh for Yom Kippur*, CCAR Press, xxiv.

^{xiv} Sifra on Lev 19:18.