

Kol Nidre 5780  
Rabbi Amy J. Sapowith

This earth was scooped from a cemetery founded by freed slaves in Drakes Branch, VA. Drakes Branch was the site of the lynching of Richard Walker, a black man. On May 5, 1886, Richard Walker who was accused of attempted assault of a white teenager, was pulled from a jail by a hateful mob, and hanged. This example may call to mind the case of Leo Frank, the Jewish factory manager who in 1913 was accused of the death of one of his factory workers. Two years later, he was taken from his prison farm by a hateful mob and hanged. Although some Jews like Frank suffered this fate, African Americans were the principal victims of lynching in the post-Reconstruction era.

I collected this earth last May as part of the Clergy Uniting For Racial Empathy (CURE) bus tour. About twenty four white and black Christian clergy, one Muslim, myself and another rabbi who is also white traveled together to key sites of racial conflict including Charlottesville, Danville, and Drakes Branch. The premise for the tour was that we are a country and a state in many ways still in need of healing and reconciliation for the racial abuses of the past. That Americans elected a black man as president of the United States to two consecutive terms certainly signals the support and good will that exists in our country for moving beyond our past, but the reality of slavery and the history of racism have left scars and an emotional legacy familiar to those with post traumatic stress whose effects are still being expressed in many of the inequities we see today.

“We still haven’t reconciled that slavery was this terrible institution *and* a founding element of our country,” says Professor Ebony Elizabeth Thomas.<sup>1</sup> Indeed

parents and teachers throughout the region are grappling with how and when to introduce students to the horrors of slavery in much the same way we grapple with how and when to introduce students to the horrors of the Holocaust.

As a one time doctoral student in African American literature, my bookshelves are lined with slave narratives, novels, essays, history and poetry written by African Americans documenting the triumphs and resilience and also the injury and scars of this struggle. And I am still learning. At a Candidate Forum for the Loudoun County School Board sponsored by the NAACP last Thursday, one audience member requested that all the candidates read the 1937 University of Richmond honors thesis called “History of Education in Loudoun County” by Dorsey Ford, which documents the black community’s long-lived commitment to education despite the many obstacles to their advancement. Continuing to educate ourselves in this way is important. Too many of us have been left with an inadequate understanding of the lengths to which some of our countrymen have gone, both legally and extra-judicially, to keep black Americans as a group from achieving the American dream. Refusing to support public education, instituting the Black Codes, Jim Crow, lynching, and redlining are a few of the historical interventions that have undermined their progress as a group and our progress as one nation.

You may have heard it said that slavery is America’s original sin. This theological framing of our past is invoked to motivate Americans to take responsibility for our history. As a Jew, I am not in the habit of thinking in terms of “original sin.” So when we talk about slavery being America’s original sin, I accept this out of respect for the largely Christian consciousness that animates our society; but in terms of understanding

my role, as Jew, in framing the problem and being part of the solution, it presents some challenges that I want to work out with you, my Jewish community, this evening.

We do have an original, as in “the first” sin in Judaism—two of them actually, which shouldn’t surprise you since we have four new years. If you were here on Rosh Hashanah morning, you’ll recall that for Jews the first sin in Torah is committed by Cain when he fails to control his temper and murders his brother, Abel. The lesson is that to avoid sin we each must learn to control our passions.

The second example of a first sin in Judaism is the first sin the Israelites commit as a people. Anyone know what it is? The sin of the Golden Calf. It was on the first Yom Kippur that God forgives the Israelites for the sin of the Golden Calf, though some say that on every Yom Kippur we are still atoning for that first sin.

Original sin from within a Christian framework teaches a different lesson. Gunther Plaut in his commentary, explains that for Christians, “after the transgression of Adam and Eve all human beings were inherently evil, redeemable “only after Jesus came into the world as the Christ. Without faith in [Christ] as the redemptive savior, people would live and die in their original sin.”<sup>ii</sup>

Plaut goes on to say that, “The mainstream of Judaism refused to make the tale of Eden an important part of its worldview and maintained that the only road to salvation was through godly deeds (*mitzvot*), rather than through belief in a savior.”<sup>iii</sup>

We see that the implication that we are all born guilty is problematic. First of all, as Jews we understand that we are born innocent. Second, children should not be held responsible for the sins of their fathers and mothers. Third, we atone for sin by acting justly through godly acts or *mitzvot*. There *is* a role for guilt—ask your mother, but it’s

not here. And practically-speaking, beginning with guilt tends to lead to resentment not reconciliation. To this point, Rabbi Harold Kushner says, “Guilt doesn’t bring out the best in anybody. When we confront our Christian neighbors with an attitude of ‘I’m Jewish, you’re Christian; therefore, you owe me one for the Holocaust,’ they probably won’t be moved to apologize sincerely and try to make it up to you. They will probably become resentful and defensive.” He then asks rhetorically: “(How do we respond to people who say to us, ‘I’m black, you’re white; you owe me something for those generations of slavery?’).”<sup>iv</sup>

But that shouldn’t end the discussion. American society was built simultaneously on an aspiration and on a transgression. A promise of equality for all and the denial of humanity for some. Consider the ways skin color has over the generations accorded white and light skinned people access to power, resources and even impunity before the law, while black people and people of color were denied the same. What I’m referring to is called white privilege. For those of us whose ancestors emigrated from Eastern Europe, and for those Jews by choice whose ancestors also came from Europe, and together that’s approximately 85-90% of American Jews, those ancestors immigrated into a system built on white privilege.<sup>v</sup> And while it took a couple of generations for Jews and non-Nordic Europeans to achieve white status, they did so largely through the benefits accessed through the post WWII GI Bill. Through the GI Bill, thousands of Jewish veterans were able to earn college degrees, receive unemployment insurance, buy a home and/or buy a business. In home ownership, alone, a Jewish family could accumulate wealth that could be passed down to one’s children giving the next generation a leg up, a benefit denied to African Americans which set them back at least two generations. A built-in bias toward

whiteness let us “in” while African American veterans, though theoretically entitled to these benefits, were in practice kept out.

“Wait!” you may say. “How can I claim white privilege when I grew up as a Jew, looking in from the margins toward some whiter, Christian ideal? To add emphasis to this point, the 20 year old Poway synagogue shooter, who killed one person and injured three others last spring declared, “I’m defending our nation against the Jewish people who are trying to destroy all white people.”<sup>vi</sup>

Karen Brodtkin, anthropology professor emerita of UCLA, in her book *How Jews Became White Folk & What That says about Race in America*, addresses the ways Caucasian Jews are both white and not white. Indeed, Jews do nothing if not prove that truth is complex though Asian Americans can find themselves in this category as well. She says, “Prevailing classifications at a particular time have sometimes assigned us to the white race, and at other times have created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit.” She continues, “Those changes in our racial assignment have shaped the ways in which American Jews who grew up in different eras have constructed their... identities.”<sup>vii</sup> Brodtkin’s parents, for example, who are children of immigrants, saw themselves as Jews. Brodtkin herself, who grew up without the same barriers that her parents experienced to jobs and neighborhoods, sees herself as Jewish *and* white. Her sons who were not raised in a Jewish milieu see themselves as generically white.

The majority of us have been both white and not-white, which gives us a foot in each court or places us between a rock and a hard place. Brodtkin calls it double vision. She says, “Those changes [in racial status] give us a kind of double vision that comes

from racial middleness: ...an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness.”<sup>viii</sup>

Dealing with the likes of the Poway as well as the Tree of Life synagogue terrorists aligns us with other people in their targets: African Americans, Muslims and Central American immigrants. But for the majority of American Jews, this alignment is differentiated by our experience of white privilege. And to the extent that white privilege continues to function in our society, should we not reflect on how our whiteness has at the least not hindered our success or our assimilation? Having made it into the halls of power and privilege, have we begun to forget what life is like on the margins of a society? I for one know that I am not always aware of white privilege at work.

One instructive example of the ordinary ways that black people continue to be overlooked, diminished or denied I learned from a colleague on the bus tour. It concerned a math class in one of the Montgomery County high schools, in which no students were understanding the material. But the students with resources, largely white, paid for private tutoring. So, when it came time for the exams, they did fine.

Meanwhile, those without the resources, largely black and Latinx, had to make do with the inadequate preparation they were getting from class. When it came time for evaluating the class, the students’ scores, buoyed by those who had private tutoring, masked the deficiencies in the classroom. The dominant narrative became: the black kids aren’t as smart, or don’t have a stable enough home life to be able to learn. As proof, just compare the test scores.

But a fairer narrative would start from the premise that learning differences are not rooted in race. This would then lead one to question the different learning outcomes,

which would in turn, prompt an investigation into the hidden details behind the test scores. This in turn could initiate improvements to the curriculum, the teaching and/or to finding resources for personal tutoring for *all* students. A similar example was shared at the NAACP-sponsored candidate forum last Thursday. It's the narrative we tell to explain the test scores that illustrates whether white privilege is at work.

Now, history shows that Jews have more often than not, and more often than other people, used our privilege in the service of furthering racial equity. And this makes me ask, then, aren't we secure enough, savvy enough, compassionate enough and I hope justice-minded enough to want to revisit race bias in our country?

Identifying with white privilege can be hard for white people, especially white Jewish people for many good reasons: because of our racial middleness, because white nationalists deface our property and attack us in our synagogues, because we believe in acting justly not in feeling guilty for past sins, because in many ways we have used our privilege in the service of racial equality at some personal sacrifice. The term white privilege is difficult also because it reduces identity to one dimension: whiteness, over all others. As such it hides the struggles and rejection, stresses, slights and injustice that each of us deals with for many reasons. And isn't that the perverseness of racism—it reduces one's identity to a single dimension. Privilege and deprivation, advantages and disadvantages accrue to all individuals in so many shifting and idiosyncratic ways. Says Rabbi Naomi Levy, "If we had the power to peer inside the heart of any human being, we would uncover there a silent anguish."<sup>x</sup>

But when we talk about white privilege, specifically, we mean having access to power and resources. We mean all the hurdles and barriers that were not put in our way

and the energy saved and opportunity gained because of that. Says Michael Eric Dyson in his book, *Tears We Cannot Stop*, “Please don’t say that your ancestors didn’t own slaves. Your white privilege has not been hampered by that fact.”<sup>x</sup>

At the same time that there is energy in our country threatening to take us back to a more violent, more unjust, more hateful era, there is energy in our country to move our society a notch closer to racial equality. There are positive efforts to increase equity in its many forms, in our curricula, in our boardrooms, in our courts, in our school system and in our county governments. Adults as well as teenagers are speaking out on this issue. Writes Bari Weiss, “The greatest shame and injustice in American history was slavery; the greatest righting of a wrong was its abolition; and among our greatest contemporary struggles is persistent racial inequality.”<sup>xi</sup> The answer to past injustice is not guilt, it’s more justice.

White supremacists assail us because we’re not white enough while some people of color eschew us because we are too white and not sufficiently downtrodden. Nevertheless, we can’t allow others to define us. Nor can we allow our success, our struggles, our busyness or our other priorities inure us to the persistent, insidious and damaging prejudice that continues to plague our schools, roadways and other institutions. We can’t be bystanders. The original racial hierarchy is still having its negative effect.

This is the time for *cheshbon hanefesh*, a full accounting of ourselves. To the extent that we have wittingly or unwittingly perpetuated racism; to the extent that we have wittingly or unwittingly failed to dismantle racism, we can atone. This atonement does not come from an original sin, it comes from a people that pursues justice in every generation. If guilt has a role, it lies with failing to educate ourselves to the full picture of

racial history in our country. This at a minimum is our responsibility. I recommend reading Carol Anderson's book, *White Rage*. Consider also joining me in sponsoring a student who has signed up for the Loudoun NAACP's Weekend Academy Saturday School. This is a program to enhance math and reading skills and offers SAT prep for pre-K through twelfth graders. You should also know that last Thursday after I addressed the candidates to express my hope and expectation that the new school board will redress the anti-Semitism that our kids are experiencing, a table of African American women behind me applauded in support.

We read tonight, "Purify me, that I may become clean; wash me, till I am whiter than snow."<sup>xii</sup> On Yom Kippur the color white represents the sincerity of our effort to return to the purity of our souls. This is not a racial purity. It is a divine goodness that resides in every human being. The white we wear further serves as a symbol of the burial shroud—a reminder of the finite time we have upon this earth. In the time we have allotted to us, let us be activists not bystanders in the ongoing struggle for liberty and justice for all.

*Lo alecha ha'melacha ligmor, v'lo l'hitbatel mimena.*

It is not up to us to complete the job but nor are we free to ignore it.

*Keyn y'hi ratzon. G'mar hatima tovah.*

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> *Washington Post*, “When Should Kids Learn About Slavery?”, 9/4/19.
- <sup>ii</sup> *The Torah: A Modern Commentary (Revised Edition)*, Union for Reform Judaism, NY, 2005, p. 37.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>iv</sup> *To Life!*, p. 276.
- <sup>v</sup> *Washington Jewish Week*, “Jews of color undercounted, researchers find,” Josefin Dolsten, June 6, 2019.
- <sup>vi</sup> AP, Sept 20, 2019.
- <sup>vii</sup> *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1998, p.1.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, pp.1-2.
- <sup>ix</sup> *To Begin Again*, p. 14.
- <sup>x</sup> *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, St. Martin’s Press, NY, 2017, p. 197.
- <sup>xi</sup> *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, Crown, NY, 2019, p. 29.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Gates Of Repentance*, p. 273.

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