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Congregation Beth Am
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After the flood, Noah got drunk.
That's understandable.
40 days and 40 nights on the Ark,
quarantined with his three sons and their wives,
and with all those animals,
so when he finally got off that big boat Noah planted a vineyard and got drunk.

This isn't the part of Noah's story we teach to our children.
There's no "the animals went in two by two, hurrah, hurrah, the animals went in two by two, hurrah, hurrah ..."¹
There's no children's song about the end of Noah's story.

You might not even know the end of Noah's story.
That's because every year we typically focus on the first part—actually, all of the other parts—
of Noah's tale.

But you're familiar with its opening words:

נח איש צדיק
תמים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו
אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ־נֹחַ:

Noah was a righteous man;
he was blameless in his generation;
With God walked Noah.²

We read these words and then year after year we discuss Noah's righteousness.
Or his relative righteousness.
What does it mean that he was blameless in **his** generation? We ask.
Would he have been considered righteous had he lived in Abraham's generation?
We talk about his righteousness,
and then we contemplate rain and rainbows,
Ravens and doves, and olive branches.
And where exactly is Mount Ararat?
And what about those timbers that archaeologists found near its summit?
Maybe the ark really did exist?
On Sundays, in schools, we measure out the dimensions of the Ark and discuss with our
students, how could Noah have fit all of those animals in there?

¹ Sung to the melody of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home."

² Genesis 6:9

How did they survive while floating on the water?
And what did they eat?

Year after year that's what we talk about when we talk about Noah:
we focus on the story's mythic properties,
a story about a mythic wiseman who,
like Gilgamesh,
survived a mythic flood on a mythic boat,
and rarely, if ever,
do we contend with the real-world implications of its ending.

I know that I haven't: in more that twenty-five years of teaching the texts of the Torah, I have never taught the last part of Noah's story.

Until tonight.

I have never taught Genesis chapter 9, verses 18–27 because, until recently, I did not know that these ten verses of the Torah had anything to do with me:
a white American Jew.
And if you are at all like me—Jewish and white—
and are committed to pursuing righteousness in our generation like Noah did in his,
then it is what happened after the flood,
at the end of Noah's story,
and its millennia-long interpretive afterlife,
that calls out to us for a reckoning.

There are no other ten verses in the Torah that have been more consequential to American history.

If relevancy is your watchword for engaging with Torah, then pay attention:
For no other ten verses are more relevant to these past ten days. They are relevant to this entire season, actually, and to this year of 2020, and perhaps to every year since 1619 and the beginning of slavery as an institution in America. It would not be farfetched to say that the Civil War was fought because of these 10 verses.

Genesis 9:18–27 calls out for a reckoning. And it calls out, in particular, to us:
for we,
Reform Jews,
we possess the capacity,
the power
to reckon with the impact of an ancient story that served as the foundation stone for the construction of caste: here in America, and also in Nazi Germany.
Two interrelated caste systems wherein one, we Jews were its victims, and in the other, white Jews—we—are its continual beneficiaries.

Let me explain.

[Sing:] The animals went in two by two
Hurrah! Hurrah!
The animals went in two by two
Hurrah! Hurrah!
The animals went in two by two
The elephant and the kangaroo
And they all went
into the ark
For to get out of the rain.

This is the end of Noah's story:

After the flood,
Shem, Ḥam, and Yaphet were the sons of Noah who came out of the ark:
Ḥam was the father of Canaan.
These three were the sons of Noah, and from them the whole world branched out.
Noah, the tiller of the soil, planted a vineyard.
He drank of the wine and became drunk, and Noah revealed himself within his tent.
Ḥam, the father of Canaan, saw Noah's nakedness and told his two brothers.
So Shem and Yaphet took a cloak, they put it on their shoulders,
walked backwards, and they covered their father's nakedness;
their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness.
It's unclear what exactly happened in Noah's tent, but it must have been something pretty bad
because when Noah woke up from his wine, and learned what his youngest son, Ḥam, had done
to him, he said,

“Damned be Canaan;
The lowest of slaves
Shall he be to his brothers.
Let Canaan be a slave to them.”³

עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים יְהִי לְאַחֵי
the slave of slaves,
the lowest of slaves
shall Ḥam be to his brothers.

The story of Ḥam's discovery of Noah's nakedness, and of Noah's curse of Ham—
that's what in English the curse becomes known as, the Curse of Ham—
this story floats like the ark across time, stowing in its hold new, and unintended, meanings.

Such as:
Shem, Ḥam, and Yaphet's descendants spread across the continents.
Shem to the Middle East, to Asia.

³ This translation of Genesis 9:18-27 is my own, but incorporates elements of both the JPS, and E. Fox's, versions.

Yaphet’s descendants journeyed west to Europe.
And Ham? Well, his people went south, to Africa.

It is indeed startling the meanings that a 10-verse biblical story can come to hold:

Between the 2nd and 4th centuries of the Common Era, in Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Curse of Ham, the sons acquired hues, pigmentation.

Blackness was introduced into the retelling of an originally colorless, biblical story.⁴

The name Ham, was thought to be related to the root *chet mem mem* meaning hot, or to the word *chom* a term that can mean dark, or black, or sooty—scholars aren’t actually sure what the name *Cham* means—but no matter: for where is it hot? And where are people Black? In Africa.

Lighter skinned, in particular white, European readers, came to see themselves in *Yaphet*, another word possessing an unclear etymology, but the elder son’s name was thought to be related to the Hebrew word *yafeh*, meaning, beautiful.

White is beautiful to white readers.⁵

Over time, European Biblicists recast a colorless, biblical narrative as a prophecy of possession and predestination, in which the righteous Noah, a man who walked with God, damns the Black son who sullied his god-like father’s honor:

עֶבֶד עַבְדִּים יִהְיֶה לְאַחֵי

Punishing him for his treachery, Noah fates Ham and his African descendants to eternal, and deserved enslavement by his white brother Yaphet, and by Yaphet’s European progeny.

Midrash teaches that after the flood when Noah got off of the ark, he repurposed its timbers to build an altar in order to make an offering to God. By the 1600s, white Europeans had repurposed the mythic elements of the final chapter of Noah’s story to build a racial ideology with real world implications. Fusing Christian dogma with ideas of African servitude, Western Europeans transformed Genesis 9:18-27 into a God-given proof-text—or better, maybe, a pretext—for the construction of real wooden boats that set sail across real oceans in which Africans were stowed in holds like animals and taken to the New World.

It is hard to know which came first: caste or biblical interpretation. Race, however, is a recent phenomenon in human history dating to the start of the transatlantic slave trade.⁶

It was in the making of the New World that Europeans became white, Africans Black, and everyone else, yellow, red or brown.⁷

⁴ See David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: University Press, 2003), E-Book, loc. 2975.

⁵ All humans are partial to the color of their own skin: such preference is a universal phenomenon and is found in all cultures at all times and neither Greeks nor Romans nor Jews considered very dark skin as aesthetically pleasing. See Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, loc. 1465.

⁶ See Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), E-Book, p. 63.

⁷ See Wilkerson, 52.

Particularly here in America, where the story of the Curse of Ham served as sacred handbook for the ruthless domination of Black slaves by white, Southern plantation owners: with whip in one hand, and Genesis 9:18-27 in the other, these tillers of the soil who self-identified as the progeny of that first farmer, white and righteous Noah, they strove to restore his honor and to fulfill Noah's prophecy.⁸

The source text for much of the fusion of history, biblical interpretation, and religious ideology that comprises this sermon is Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. I recommend it to you.

Wilkerson teaches that caste, like race, is an artificial construct, a fixed hierarchy used to determine standing and respect, assumptions of beauty and competence, access to resources, and even who, in America, gets the benefit of the doubt.

At the very bottom of America's caste system, from its inception in the 17th century, were those—and now the descendants of those—who were brought here to be enslaved. To this day, your standing in the hierarchy of caste in America is, in great part, indexed to the color of your skin. The more you look like the Western Europeans who devised our caste system, the higher your elevation, the closer you are to its apex. Race—and more trenchantly, Racism—functions as a tool for the maintenance of caste: It keeps everyone in their proper place. But caste is more comprehensive, more insidious than race, in great part because we often cannot see its underlying architecture: but it's there, undergirding much of the injustice and disparity that we live with in this country.⁹

To paraphrase the title of Wilkerson's book: caste **is** the origin of our discontents, and in the course of human history, three caste systems have risen to the top. The oldest and largest democracies, India and the United States, are both built on caste structures fortified by readings of sacred texts.¹⁰ But only one of these systems begot another. When the Nazis sought to rapidly construct a new caste system that would condemn Jews to its lowest sub-caste, they looked to America for inspiration, where, after the Civil War, the water-logged, rotting boards of Noah's Ark had once again been repurposed to build a new iteration of a now centuries old system of white supremacy.

This thoroughly American caste system acquired a name—Jim Crow—and, in the 1920s and 30s, it acquired some avid, German students. With admiration, the Nazis wondered how the United States had managed to turn its racial hierarchy into rigid law, yet retain such a sterling reputation in the world.¹¹ So they studied segregation in America, and Jim Crow, and took careful note of its one-drop rule: a legal principle of racial classification which asserted that any person with even one black ancestor—"one drop" of black blood—that person was considered black.

⁸ As Goldenberg writes, Gen. 9:18-27 provided the "biblical justification for slavery and a historical account of servitude's introduction in the postdiluvian world." See Goldenberg, loc. 1048.

⁹ See "It's More Than Racism: Isabel Wilkerson Explains America's Caste System" (<https://www.npr.org/2020/08/04/898574852/its-more-than-racism-isabel-wilkerson-explains-america-s-caste-system>).

¹⁰ See Wilkerson, 104.

¹¹ Wilkerson, 82.

The Nazi's Nuremberg Laws were the offspring of our enduring racial hierarchy that continues to debase Black lives, and to relegate People of Color to its lowest tiers. From American anti-miscegenation statutes, and from Jim Crow's emphasis on blood purity, the Nazis drew the textual precedents, vocabulary, and the legal structures for a caste system that consigned Jews to a doomed subcaste based on the noxious—and entirely artificial—concept of Jewish blood.

One insidious caste system branched out from another, and the origin of both, the source text? Genesis 9:18-27.

[Sing]: The animals went in two by two
Hurrah! Hurrah!
The animals went in two by two
Hurrah! Hurrah!
The animals went in two by two
The elephant and the kangaroo
And they all went
into the ark
For to get out of the rain.

A civil war song, “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” a drinking song sung by both Confederate and Union soldiers, provides the melody for this little ditty about Noah and his ark. I knew the name of this tune, but when I learned of its provenance in the course of researching this sermon, I realized that unintentionally, unwittingly, by using this melody to convey the story of Noah, we've long been singing of caste and race, of bloodshed and white supremacy, we've long been singing to children of all of these subcutaneous meanings now held by the end of Noah's story. We just couldn't hear them as we hum because most of our Ashkenazi ancestors didn't arrive on the shores of this country until after the war had ended. Or, as we sing, we couldn't grasp white supremacists' readings of this ten-verse myth, in great part because, as I said at the outset of this sermon, we Jews rarely discuss the end of Noah's story. But also, in great part, we aren't attuned to these pernicious meanings because we white Jews have a propensity to not see ourselves as white. After all, “We aren't white, we're Jews!” At least that's we tell ourselves; I know I have. Despite analysis of the human genome that has established as fact that all human beings are 99.9 percent the same,¹² we also don't see ourselves as Black.

That could be because we aren't supposed to see Blackness, particularly if you, like me, were encouraged as a child to be colorblind—which meant that we were not supposed to see Blackness. I tried; it didn't work. Instead, I became blind to—or I was never taught to see—the rights and privileges that our caste system accorded to me *solely* because of the color of my skin. Now and again however, I would find myself, for a few moments, considering my own pigmentation, my skin tone. It usually happened when I needed to fill out an official document or survey, like the 2020 Census.

¹² Wilkerson, p. 65.

Maybe this happens to you too: I look in vain for a little box to check that says, “Jewish,” but then I settle for the one that says, “White.” It’s perhaps the only time that I personally experience—that I feel—how the color of your skin can confine you to a box.

But caste is insensitive to feelings: mine, yours. The Nazi’s caste system certainly didn’t care about Jews’ feelings, and the American Caste system, in which we are all enmeshed, is clearly insensitive to the feelings of Blacks and other Peoples of Color.

The hierarchy of caste doesn’t care about feelings;
that’s because caste isn’t *about* feelings,
it’s about power, and who holds it;
it’s about resources: which castes have them, and which do not.
It’s about authority and respect and who has it, and who doesn’t.¹³

And we, white, American Jews, we hold all three: respect, resources,
and power.

Our power is the evidence of our success in this country, and our accrual of multi-generational wealth, political influence, and high social status, can be attributed to many factors, including our own resilience when targeted by bigots and anti-Semites: as an ethnic minority, we have overcome our share of obstacles. But Jewish success in America, particularly for Jews of Ashkenazi descent, was rarely impeded by the color of our skin: one of the very few immutable features of all human beings’ identities. And in a hierarchical system indexed to skin-color, white Jews, like many of us, are able to “pass” in ways that our darker skinned neighbors, fellow citizens, and fellow Jews, are not.

Since we are able to “pass,” as an ethnic group we’ve also been able to rise: in a remarkably short period, particularly in comparison to the descendants of enslaved Africans, we American Jews have risen from lower to middle, to upper-caste. And now that we live near or at the apex of one white supremacist caste system, let us never forget that we were once the lowest sub-caste of another.

After the flood, Shem, Ham, and Yaphet, were the sons of Noah who came out of the ark:
and from them the whole world branched out.

We Jews aren’t responsible for the millennia of white, Christian interpretations of the last chapter of Noah’s story; but we, white American Jews, have benefited from what white Supremacists wrought from a 10-verse story found in our Torah. The great, and tragic, irony is that Genesis 9:18-27,
although a story about differentiation—its writers were making a case for how Israelites are different from Canaanites,
and a story about filial responsibility and kinship,
a story that asserts that we are all the descendants of Noah,

¹³ Wilkerson, 17.

the source-text for America's racially-based caste system, Genesis 9:18-27, is about these, and so many other things. What it isn't is a story about race and racism. It can't be: because there is no race or racism in the Bible. But that's a teaching for a different sermon.

The teaching of this sermon is:

In the midst of the storm of hate, political polarization, and of rising inequity that is flooding our country, I fear that we upper-caste Jews are becoming increasingly incapable of hearing, and heeding, a different prophecy birthed from the same sacred texts that undergird caste in America. As old as Jim Crow, and passed down by our white American forebearers in order to serve us as a sacred handbook, this interpretative tradition repurposes mythic elements of Noah's story to build a new ideology predicated not on curse and segregation, but upon kinship and righteousness.

It goes like this:

In 1885, 20 years after all those Johnny's went marching home, 15 Reform Rabbis gathered in Pittsburgh to issue what was the first of what are now 5 statements that delineate the principles of Reform Judaism. The 8th and final plank of what is known as the Pittsburgh Platform states,

We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.¹⁴

In the next declaration of principles, as the terrors of the Nazi regime were slowly becoming known, a new generation of Reform Rabbis declared in the Columbus Platform of 1937,

Judaism emphasizes the kinship of the human race, and aims at the elimination of man-made misery and suffering... Justice to all...is the inalienable right and the inescapable obligation of all.

The 1976 platform, adopted in San Francisco, states,

Judaism emphasizes action rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life, the means by which we strive to achieve universal justice and peace.

This platform, my personal favorite, engendered the contemporary watchwords of Reform Judaism: "individual autonomy" and "choice through knowledge."

Plank by plank, platform by platform, our Reform Jewish forebearers articulated for us, their descendants, a counter-construct to racial hierarchy in America; an ideology founded not on the artificial premise of race, but built upon the cornerstone of justice, of righteousness, of *tzedek*.

¹⁴ See <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/>, for the complete texts of the CCAR Platforms.

When Shem and Yaphet entered Noah's tent to cover up their father's nakedness, a midrash teaches that they hid their faces with their hands while they walked backwards into their father's tent.¹⁵ On this day, on Yom Kippur, we have entered this tent, our virtual *Mishkan*, to reckon with our past, and to recommit ourselves to the pursuit of righteousness in our time.

Though we all may be the descendants of Noah, unlike Shem and Yaphet, we Reform Jews do not avert our eyes from painful truths: we turn around and look. Confronted with new knowledge, we reassess our understandings of our past and, accordingly, change our actions. And if we are committed to being righteous in our age, like Noah was in his, we must then fuse our understandings of the well-known opening words of Noah's story, with our knowledge of the uncomfortable truths that are now contained in its ending.

We are the descendants of Noah. And we, white Jews, are the beneficiaries of a caste system that plagues our country. A by-product of our privilege, is that we possess the power to dismantle systems of inequity and injustice. To do that, it will likely require us to cede some of our power, and to transfer some of our wealth. And while these truths may *feel* uncomfortable, righteousness, like caste, isn't about feelings. It's about action.

We are the heirs to a prophetic tradition that instructs us to prioritize action and obligates our pursuit of justice, a magnificent ideology, that grants us individual autonomy and the right to make informed choices about our practice.

So I ask, in this year, 5781, with our new knowledge what actions will we take?

¹⁵ See GenR 36:6.