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Parashat Naso
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My mother was born in Stuyvesant Town, a massive housing complex of more than 11,000 apartments on the East Side of Manhattan ranging from 14th street to 23rd street. Her father, my grandfather, had just returned from Europe after his tour as a GI. He spent time in a prison camp in Germany after he had been wounded and captured at the battle of Anzio.

My grandparents were among 200,000 applicants for the new residential project built to offer World War II veterans affordable housing. They got lucky and they started their family in a two bedroom apartment at 11 Stuyvesant Oval! Their rent - 82 dollars a month, they even got a spot in the garage for an extra 20 bucks.

At one point, if you walked through the grass lawns and the towers of Stuyvesant Town, you may have stumbled on a plaque from 1947 honoring the establishment of the complex which praise Sty Town as a place where "families of moderate means might live in health, comfort and dignity in parklike communities, and that a pattern might be set of private enterprise productively devoted to public service." What a place, a suburb in the City, as MetLife, the developers of Stuyvesant Town claimed, an affordable place to live in health, comfort and dignity. Only catch - you had to be white. Stuyvesant Town didn't rent to black veterans.

My dad's parents left New York City in the late 1940s and moved to Eastchester, New York. They were able to buy a home in an emerging suburb in Westchester County for something around 16 thousands dollars. By the time they retired there was considerable equity in that property. That coupled with their hard work and achievement enabled them to retire comfortably and leave an inheritance for their children. A black GI returning from the war did not have that opportunity. Redlining prevented the purchase of a home in many neighborhoods and made it much more difficult to achieve the type of middle or upper middle class life many of us were blessed to be born into.

If you were a member of a black family looking to settle in Palo Alto immediately after World War II, it's likely you would have found the following clause in the majority of Palo Alto's subdivisions: "No person not wholly of the white Caucasian race shall use or occupy such property unless such person or persons are employed as servants of the occupants..."

If it wasn't that explicit, a black family likely would have been guided away from Palo Alto by local realtors or denied a mortgage loan from a bank. Today, Palo Alto's African-American population still stands at just 2%, as it has since the Great Depression.

<http://www.paloaltohistory.org/discrimination-in-palo-alto.php>

I certainly know that everything was not easy for Jews of my grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations. Structural anti-semitism abounded -- Jews were kept out of

certain neighborhoods, were limited by quota systems at universities and experienced discrimination that vastly limited employment. Ashkenazi Jews didn't see themselves as white - whites were Anglo-Saxon Protestants who wielded all the power. Fears of Leo Frank, and The Holocaust and The Rosenbergs were deep in the Jewish psyche.

However, as the 20th and now the 21st century unfolded, Ashkenazi Jews became more and more white - if not in self-perception at least with regard to so many of the systems at play in America. Professor Karen Brodtkin writes: "It's a myth that Jewish pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps." Ethnic groups with mostly lighter skin, including European Jews, have benefited from not only a can-do attitude but a history of programs that have allowed Jews to float on a rising economic tide, while African-Americans continue to endure the cement boots of segregation, redlining, urban-renewal, and discrimination." (Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority)

I know many Ashkenazi Jews have some struggles with this "white" identity - there is a mismatch between our internal identity and outward perception. We are a small minority in America. There are still horrific acts of violent anti-Semitism. We encounter swastikas in schools. We know deep in our core, that historically our acceptance has been challenged or stripped by governments.

Yet - on a daily basis white Jews enjoy the same daily privileges as other white people. A few months ago, the door to the Egan Middle School in Los Altos where I play weekly basketball was mistakenly locked. The Asian and White guys I played with went to every entrance pulling on each door to see if it was unlocked, eventually someone opened the gym by climbing through an open window. The Black guys I played with waited in their cars, knowing that the sight of one of them pulling on doors or climbing through an open window would have caused a vastly different reaction in the heart of Los Altos.

Nobody crosses the street when they see me coming toward them. Store owners don't hover over white Jewish teenagers out of suspicion of shop-lifting. Employers don't hesitate to interview people with Jewish sounding names. Jewish Americans don't die of COVID three times more than the rest of the population. I don't get chased when I go out for a run. Nobody calls 911 when we bird-watch in the park. White Jews do not live in fear with each and every encounter with the Police. There is no knee on my neck.

This week's Torah portion, Naso, God commands Moses: "Speak to the Israelites: When men or women individually commit any wrong toward a fellow human being, thus breaking faith with the Eternal, and they realize their guilt, they shall confess the wrong that they have done. They shall make restitution" (Numbers 5:6-7). The word for guilt in this section - hitvadu - appears in the reflexive form, suggesting that not only must we confess the wrong we've committed, but we must internalize the wrong that we've committed. The Torah draws a firm line between a confession "made to cleanse" the wrongdoer's soul, and a restitution which requires the action

of restitution. If we say the words and don't do the work - we're simply holding up our most sacred text as a photo-opportunity, with no disregard to the pain and punishment we've inflicted on others.

That is the action of forming an antiracist community - the deep internalization of the problem, and the willingness not just to call out others but to hold a real mirror to ourselves as individuals and as a community. Chris Harrison, writes in his piece called *Black Jews are Tired ...* "In short, antiracism must be as integral to and synonymous with our Jewish communities as reciting the [Sh'ma](#)."

How do we do that? Part of it requires the acknowledgement and recognition that the playing field is not level. We need to know and internalize that each of our experiences are different than those of people of color. Rabbi Tiferet Berenbaum, who is Black, writes: We read in the Haggadah that "in every generation, we are commanded to see ourselves as one leaving Egypt." This is because slavery wears a different cloak in different generations, and we have to see ourselves, see it for ourselves, and understand it in order to help those who are currently stuck in its grasp."

Acknowledging and internalizing are good first steps. But we have more homework. How can we live the words of the Torah by heading not just toward confession but toward restitution?

First off, we need to deeply listen to those people of color who are in our community. That listening might be uncomfortable and agitational - there has been racial profiling at Beth Am, most of us don't think twice about the mostly white security guards here on Shabbat. Believe me our black members notice them. In the coming months they'll be more opportunities for listening.

But, a synagogue of mostly white people should not need to wholly depend on our members of color, or outside invited guests who show up for a class or Shabbat lecture, to do the education for us. One way to strive toward being an anti-racist individual and community is to know people who do not look like us. As Brian Stevenson says "Get close to people you care about helping. Proximity is essential because it will change you." Our organizing network with the IAF does this work. We need your help to build a relationship based justice network in our counties.

As part of our Beth Am read series, we'll be reading *How to Be Anti-Racist* by Ibrahim Kendi, please join us for this important conversation at the end of this month. Our Youth Programming is committed toward working with our parents about discussing race and privilege in our community. Our President Beth Am Andy Cheng is on the Board of Be'chol Lashon an organization whose mission is to Be'chol Lashon brings the historic Jewish commitment to civil rights and racial justice forward into the 21st century. Together with Andy and Be'chol Lashon we are working to bring conversation and action around race to Beth Am, we hope you join us.

Rabbi David Stern of Dallas urges us, “The God who heard the cry of the oppressed requires us to listen – to narratives of racism, to exposures of white privilege and educational inequities and mythic meritocracies. We do not need to agree with everything we hear, but we need to hear it. And when that hearing produces pain, then we need to feel it. And if that pain motivates us to create a more just and safe society instead of silencing the truths that disturb us, we will know that we have broken through the silence towards hope.”

Lo Alecha Hamlacha Ligmor, Pirkei Avot teaches. The work is not your responsibility to complete but neither may you desist from doing your part.

Are we unhappy with the world as it is?

Do we have aspirations for the world as it should be?

Do we feel a sense of holy outrage

Can we use that outrage to motivate us?

The only way we can realize the ideals we want to teach our children is together.

We are the witnesses

We are the fighters for justice

We are the prophets of peace

<https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2020/06/01/black-jews-are-tired>