

The Fierce Urgency of Now: Black Lives, Trans* Lives, and the Invisible Book of Life¹

Rosh ha-Shana Morning Drash 5777/2016

Congregation Bet Mishpachah

By Rabbi Laurie Green

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there **is** such a thing as being too late ...

There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect.”²

Almost 50 years ago, Dr. King spoke these words, and today: Cop killing black man, after cop killing black man, and the intentional murder of police officers.

Mass shooting, after mass shooting, and the single largest mass shooting in American history, targeting the gay and Latino communities, on Pride and *Shavuot*.

This year we lost Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres, *aleihem l’shalom*.

This year, there were 19 reported murders of trans* people, *aleihen l’shalom*. All but three were black women.

Yet 2016 will go down in history as a watershed moment in trans* rights.

On May 9, the Attorney General sued the state of North Carolina for violating the civil rights and since June 30, trans* members of the military can serve out and proud.

Last week, California outlawed prolonged solitary confinement of minors, as we entered the fourth week of the largest prison strike in U.S. history.

Herzl said “if you will it, it is no dream,” but without the sheer force of will, dreams die hard.

Can we feel Ta-Nehisi Coates’s nightmare when he writes:

“To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease.... The law did not protect us... a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can only protect you with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or has succeeded at something much darker”³

Is the world getting scarier, or are we just waking up?

¹ I’d like to thank Dr. Dana Beyer, Rabbi Daniel Burg, Ms. Sarajane Garten, Rabbi Avi Kilip, Rabbi Janet Marder, and Ms. Sabrina Sojourner for much of the thinking and some of the words that make up this drash. They are my *chevrei*, my teachers and my friends.

² From the speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam,” delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, April 1967 at Manhattan’s Riverside Church.

³ Coates, Ta-Nehisi, *Between the World and Me*, p. 17-18.

I must use this pulpit particularly to address racism and transphobia, and also the persistent violence, poverty, and xenophobia here, in Israel, and around the world.

It is not my intention to address a long list of problems, but rather to ponder just one question: Why does now feel fiercer and more urgent than ever?

Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha b'sinat chinam—For the sin we have committed against You by condemning others in the same ways others have condemned us.

“...race is the child of racism, not the father...” explains Coates.

“Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society...this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.”⁴

To understand Coates, we must consider what it means to be Jewish and white. Not all of us are white Jews. Jews of Color are thankfully among us, along with our non-Jewish lovers and friends of diverse backgrounds. But for those of us who are white, or “believe we are,” how do we reconcile our whiteness and our Jewishness?⁵

And with much love to our straight members and guests, for most of us, this is further complicated by what it means to be Jewish, white, and LGBT.

Sometimes we let our very real experiences of oppression conceal our privilege from ourselves.

Particularly as Jews and as LGBT people, this white-identified privilege creates a very tenuous space.

We love to talk about the Jews who gave their lives for civil rights, but we hate to acknowledge the Jews who owned African slaves.

In fact, we're so misinformed that we believe that Jews-of-color are a new development in Jewish history, when actually, one thousand years ago, only 20% of world Jewry was Ashkenazi, the German Jews that we today call white.

Al chet sh'chatanu lifanecha lo yodim—For the sin we have committed against You unknowingly.

Yes, less than one thousand years ago, only one in five of the world's Jews were white. Not coincidentally, some studies estimate that today, the population of Jews who are not white is, you guessed it, 20%.

In fact, Jewish communities in Yemen, Morocco, Ethiopia, India, Italy and China are all older than the Eastern European Jewish communities from which most of us descend. Yet, Yiddish speakers call Judaism “*yiddishkeit*.”

⁴ Coates, Ta-Nehisi, *Between the World and Me*.

⁵ Burg, Rabbi Daniel Kotzin, “Race, the Jewish Conundrum and the Fierce Urgency of Now,” Yom Kippur 5776.

We don't want to acknowledge the "disquieting truth: that we...as much as any group...have benefitted from policies...imbued with racist attitudes."⁶

We all want to believe we earned admission to that great school, and every penny of that raise. And we are smart, hard-working, accomplished folks.

But if you're white, getting a mortgage is just easier and getting your resume to the top of the pile is more likely.

And, if you're a man, buying a car is just easier and getting a promotion is more likely. And if the world perceives you as fitting into a box in the gender binary, doing most **anything** is just easier.

A true story:⁷ there was a group of gay and trans* teenagers hanging out in a gay neighborhood because they had no place else to go, doing what teenagers with no place to go tend to do—drinking, smoking, and making noise.

They never hurt anybody.

The wealthy gay resident had the cops get rid of them. The kids were mostly of color and the residents were mostly white.

Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha b'sinat chinam—For the sin we have committed against You by condemning others in the same ways others have condemned us.

V'al chet shechatanu lifanecha b'imutz halev—And for the sin we have committed against You by hardening our hearts.

"How do we synthesize our pain and our privilege?"⁸

Let us take an *Ahavnu* moment to acknowledge that we have much to be proud of. This congregation has literally changed the world entire. We fought for gay rights in the United States and Israel.

Our congregation includes those among the cutting edge in lesbian healthcare and Latina healthcare and trans* healthcare. A member edited a great book called *Queer Brown Voices*, and another practically invented the field of gay family law in Maryland.

One member travels the world fighting genocide, while another literally frees children from brothels.

At Bet Mishpachah, nobody thinks it's weird to be in an inter-racial relationship or no relationship. Nobody whispers about you if you're in recovery or in a family where your children share 3, 4, 5, or 6 parents—across races, religions, and continents.

⁶ Burg, Rabbi Daniel Kotzin, "Race, the Jewish Conundrum and the Fierce Urgency of Now," Yom Kippur 5776.

⁷ This incident, which occurred in New York City, was recounted to me by Robert Bank, the President of the American Jewish World Service.

⁸ Burg, Rabbi Daniel Kotzin, "Race, the Jewish Conundrum and the Fierce Urgency of Now," Yom Kippur 5776.

We have lots of money in special funds for disability access, and financial aid to the poor.
Paying for postage is underfunded.

As a congregation, we always pay a living wage, which is more than a lot of synagogues and churches do.

We live our values...sometimes just by living.

And we are appropriately burned out!

We deserve a relaxing retirement. And those of us much too young to retire still need to pay the rent, study for finals, or go to the beach.

We deserve a break!

For we are not often guilty of the sin of indifference, and we are not often guilty of the sin of baseless hatred.

We want to do what is right.

There are lots of reasons why we don't do the things we know we should, but they basically boil down to three things—burn out, fear, and denial.

Burn out is a serious problem, but the response to burn out should be a timeout, not surrender. We must learn to find balance in the midst of struggle.

Fear, like burnout, may be inevitable.

Fear of failure, fear of being hated, fear of looking bad.

And sadly, our fear is not irrational.

This year, Israel politics kept inserting itself in destructive and scary ways—from the Creating Change conference to the Black Lives Matter platform.

Now, we here run the gamut of views on Israel politics—right, left and center—and that's good, but surely we can agree that accusing Israel of actual genocide is beyond the pale and beyond disgusting.

We could easily turn away, feeling forced to choose, feeling scared and overwhelmed, but surely we can find a way to love Israel in all her beautiful complexity, and stand for justice in Charlotte and Charleston... and in Hebron and Hadera.

Because Black Lives Matter, Trans* Lives Matter, Syrian Lives Matter. Because while all lives **should** matter, they just don't! And that is **the fierce urgency of now!**

So we find courage and strength to keep going, only to encounter one last reason why we don't always do what we know we should—denial.

Not the denial of evil, but denial of our role in that evil.

I learned this lesson from Rabbi Avi Kilip, who taught a fascinating lesson relating the laws of damages to racism in America.⁹ For the Talmud creates three different categories of motivations which cause animals to cause damages.

The first category is intentional, angry or violent, like a goring ox.

The second category refers to an animal doing damage just through its normal behavior. It walks about, stepping on whatever is in its way. No emotion or thought is involved.

The final category results from seeking pleasure. The animal didn't plan to eat your crops, but it was hungry. It saw a squirrel to chase, and knocked over your fence, by accident.

In our society, we tend to focus on the first category, the malicious variety, and ignore the other two.

We think, "I don't dislike black people, so I can't be racist."

We consider our good intentions, and let ourselves off the hook.

"But much of the damage caused by racism in America is not motivated by any hatred or anger; it just comes about through the way the system itself is set up.

I may cause damage...just by...how I walk in the world...

When I go to the store..., I...fail to notice that the salesperson immediately caters to my every need while the black woman next to me is ignored or...followed around..."¹⁰

Al chet sh'chatanu lifanecha lo yodim—For the sin we have committed against You unknowingly.

"Most of the damage we do...is...in pursuit of bettering our own lives."¹¹ It's not that I wanted fewer black kids at my son's school. It's just that the city has so few good schools, and I wanted a spot for my child.

Our intent needn't be malicious for the result to be malignant.

So how does the Talmud determine liability. Here too there are three categories.

For those who are intentionally sinful, they must pay three-fold, four-fold the cost of the damage they have done.

For those who were negligent, they are responsible for 100% of the damage, no more, no less.

Finally, the Talmud creates a category of lesser liability for good people who really couldn't have known their donkey would knock down your fence.

⁹ Kilip, Rabbi Avi, "How Studying Talmud Helped Me Understand Racism in America," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, August 7, 2016.

¹⁰ Kilip, Rabbi Avi, "How Studying Talmud Helped Me Understand Racism in America," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, August 7, 2016.

¹¹ Kilip, Rabbi Avi, "How Studying Talmud Helped Me Understand Racism in America," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, August 7, 2016.

In those cases, the well-meaning donkey owner must pay for half the damage done, even though they did nothing wrong.

Someone is going to pay, the Talmud says, so why should the victim foot the entire bill?

Jewish tradition sets a very high bar.

“It’s not enough to avoid intentional harm.

We have to see ourselves...as liable for our involvement in upholding, even benefiting from, a rigged and racist system.”¹²

Thank goodness you’re probably not the evil person that needs to pay three-fold, or even the negligent jerk that owes 100%.

So how do we find manageable ways to repay a portion of our unintentional damage?

Here are three tangible things you can do in only ten minutes per week.

First, read: When you leave this morning, take a reading list from the table. Choose a book, learn, and pass it on to a friend.

Next, advocate for change. A very effective partner has been Jews United for Justice. Join their campaigns for affordable housing, paid leave, police reform, and a \$15 wage.

Few of us have time to go to meetings, but you can make a phone call, and JUFJ has an effective phone call campaign that takes just a few minutes.

Finally, get personal. Patronize minority-owned businesses. Make new friends.

In this new year, we overflow with gratitude for our many blessings.

But our blessings are diminished by the knowledge that others, due mostly to their race or gender, do not share in equal abundance.

And our blessings “are diminished when we admit the hard truth: that we’ve been playing with a stacked deck...

It’s time to put our cards on the table, and...begin to right egregious wrongs.”¹³

In conclusion, I needn’t remind you of the brilliant liturgy this talented community created.

In *Ahavnu* we declare:

Patarnu—we find solutions to troubling problems

Tzadaknu—we work to make our world more just

Kibalnu acharayut—we accept responsibility... and (we) step in without being asked

Rainu—we see the suffering of others

Tamachnu—we support leaders who defend (not only) our rights (but the rights of others)

¹² Kilip, Rabbi Avi, “How Studying Talmud Helped Me Understand Racism in America,” *The Jewish Daily Forward*, August 7, 2016.

¹³ Burg, Rabbi Daniel Kotzin, “Race, the Jewish Conundrum and the Fierce Urgency of Now,” Yom Kippur 5776.

Tikanu—we mend what has been torn¹⁴

When you hear the shofar blast this morning?

When you hear the shofar at the end of *Yom Kippur*, and go eat delicious food in a fancy hotel, will you hear **the fierce urgency of now**?

Shimon Peres' critics called him "a naïve optimistic dreamer." As President Clinton declared, "they were only wrong about the naïve part. He knew exactly what he was doing in being overly optimistic.... [Peres was] Israel's biggest dreamer.... Now he is gone, leaving only a blessed memory and a powerful example. [And] That's more than enough."¹⁵

"There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect."¹⁶

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written..."¹⁷

"*Avinu Malkeinu, Imeinu Shechinateinu*, inscribe us in the book of life."¹⁸

¹⁴ Only slight alterations have been made to the end of *Ahavnu*, a piece of liturgy written by members of the Bet Mishpachah Liturgy Committee for our congregation's *machzor*. The deletions and alterations of translations are made both for time and for rhetoric. They remain true to the meaning of the Hebrew and the values of the congregation.

¹⁵ President Bill Clinton's remarks at the state funeral for Shimon Peres on September 30, 2016.

¹⁶ From the speech, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam," delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, April 1967 at Manhattan's Riverside Church.

¹⁷ *Machzor*

¹⁸ *Machzor*