

Rabbi Lucy H.F. Dinner  
Kol Nidre, 5776

Temple Beth Or  
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### The Chieftans to the Water Carriers

Kol Nidre: our people's version of (hashtag) #JewishLivesMatter; or should that be DoJewishLivesMatter? Somehow the "LivesMatter" hashtags have become flashpoints for both civil rights and uncivil discourse in the timespan of this last year.

We Jews have been championing our version of "JewishLivesMatter" eons before hashtags existed. It has its origins in the Yom Kippur Torah reading: --- "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore *Bcharta B'Chayim* **choose life**, that you and your descendants may live." (Deut 30:19).

"Choose life that you and your descendants may live." Choose life this Yom Kippur because JewishLivesMatter. The commandment "Choose life that you shall live" instructs us to make our **lives matter, so that our descendants and their descendants will inherit the blessings of our days**. As Rabbi Citrin reminded us on Rosh HaShanah we have each inherited the ethical legacy of our ancestors. It is part of our historical memory. Furthermore, your actions and mine are now shaping the next Jewish generation's ethical heritage. Through the choices we make we determine how our lives will matter, how our heritage will matter.

B'charta b'chayim, the Jewish version of JewishLivesMatter makes sense only in tandem with the beginning of the Yom Kippur portion. "*Atem nitzavim hayom, kol hem lifnei Adonai Eloheihem*<sup>1</sup>. You are standing here this day – all of you before the Lord your God." "All of you are here suggests a much broader message than the particular commandment to Jews to "Choose life."

Let's take a look at who was standing there that day: the heads of the tribes were there – not unlike the heads of Beth Or's tribe holding Torahs before us this Kol Nidre. The chieftans and elders – our Raleigh natives who understand the history and evolution of our community. The men, women, children, even the babies – the masses that fill our congregation this evening, like no other. That should include everyone, but

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 29

the text does not stop there. It goes on to say: “all of them were there from the one who chops the wood to the one who draws the water.”

If it already states “all of them were there” why does it then also name specifically water carriers and wood choppers? Rashi, renowned medieval Torah Commentator, explains that the wood choppers and water carriers were Canaanites who wanted to join the Jewish people. To prove their sincerity they took on the lowliest job in society.

**Their lives mattered;** the ones with the least appetizing jobs, with the lowest standing, those who were not fully members of the community – Rashi’s teaching implies that the wood chopper and water carrier - the foreigners were on equal standing with the whole community of Israel at the mountain before God. Not just Jewish lives, but the lives of the minorities among you, the lives of those who have the least, the strangers in your midst – they were standing there that day.

On Yom Kippur we join as a community to fulfill our particularistic task as Jews “Bcharta b’chaim choose life that you and your descendants will live.” Standing with the wood chopper and the water carrier gives us the universal corollary, that in order for our lives to matter as Jews, we have to respect every life. JewishLivesMatter only when we guarantee that AllLivesMatter. AllLivesMatter only when we assure that the water carrier gets the same respect as the chieftain, that those with the least among us have the same rights as those with the most.

50 years past the Civil Rights Movement, as much as has changed, we have not overcome the hurdle of assuring that Black Lives Matter. We have come a long way from my middle school years when police broke up daily race riots on the school yard. We have traveled thousands of miles since the first march on Selma, and since the 1964 Mississippi murder of three Civil Rights workers by the KKK where the murderers got off with a slap on the hand. That we have come that distance fails to ameliorate the fact that in subtle and not so subtle ways people of color do not stand as equals in the United States.

Most, not all, but most of us, in this sanctuary have inherited much more than our precious Jewish heritage. Most of us live under the privileges of being born white in America. White privilege is a complicated concept because it is not something we gain through some hostile act or blatant discrimination. Until one peers through the lens of a

person of color, it is so ordinary it does not feel like privilege at all. Nonetheless, if we open our eyes we will see it all around.

This week in Confirmation Class, for example, one of the students said that at her school when she walks down the hall the teachers passing her give her a friendly wave. On the other hand, she reported that teachers stop every black and Latino student and grill them to show their hall pass and ID. Most of the other Confirmation students reported that teachers favoring of white students is standard practice at their school as well.

It happens in school, it happens at work, it happens in the grocery store, or at the park or the mall. This summer I was in a check-out line behind a black couple who took out a credit card to pay. When the woman was about to slide her card her partner said don't use that one, I need to add money to that account. When she took out a second card the cashier quipped: "How do I know you have money on that card?" This has NEVER happened to me. If my card is not approved the clerk ALWAYS assumes that it is something wrong with the card reader – not that I am trying to get away with fraud.

Consider the privilege in your own life, the doors your parents opened for you and that you have opened for your children and friends. My college, summer job at a boutique clothing store came on the esteem of my father's name. Think about the number of job interviews you have had where a family member or friend opened a door for you. So many of us have been on both the giving and receiving end of such leads many times over.

Those in the African-American community often don't have that kind of legacy passed down to them. 45.8 percent of young black children (under age 6) live in poverty, compared to 14.5 percent of white children.<sup>2</sup> While 85% of white children will be able to get a leg up in the work world through their parents and friends' work connections, less than 55% of blacks will have access to this advantage.

Author Ta-Nehisi Coates paints the disadvantages of living as an African American in vivid language in his book *Between the World and Me*. Hear his words not critically but through the pain of his cry, not judging but with empathy for his struggle. He says:

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<sup>2</sup> [www.stateofworkingamerica.org/fact-sheets/poverty/](http://www.stateofworkingamerica.org/fact-sheets/poverty/)

“Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets America made. That is a philosophy for... –(those) who can protect nothing, who are made to fear not just the criminals among them but the (system’s enforcers) who lord over them...” Coates continues: “It was only after you that I understood this love, that I understood the grip of my mother’s hand. She knew that the galaxy itself could kill me, that all of me could be shattered and all of her legacy spilled upon the curb like bum wine. And no one would be brought to account for this destruction, because my death would not be the fault of any human but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of ‘race,’ imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgment of invisible gods.... They sent the killer of [my friend] back to his work, because he was not a killer at all. He was a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s physical laws<sup>3</sup>.

My colleague Rabbi Jason Rosenberg suggests we set aside our own filters and hear Coate’s anguish: “Forget any counter arguments for a moment. Instead, just imagine what it’s like to grow up in a world like that. A world in which you truly believe that (the authorities) are more likely to attack you than to save you. Imagine what it’s like having to grow up having what parents of black children often call “the talk,” when they tell their kids exactly how to act, and how not to act.... Don’t wear your hood up. Keep your hands out of your pockets, but don’t move them too quickly. Smile, but not too much.”<sup>4</sup>

The wood cutter and water carrier are not mentioned just as an afterthought. Without them No Lives Matter. I am an activist for rights for African Americans because if I am not then my life does not matter. This summer I marched and spoke when the NAACP’s America’s Journey for Justice came through Raleigh. Over the course of 40 days, from Selma, Alabama, to Washington, DC, almost 1000 miles, marchers collectively traversed. The Central Conference of American Rabbis signed on as a co-sponsor of the walk and at least one rabbi a day, multiple on most days, carried a Torah

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<sup>3</sup> Ta-Nehasi Coates, *Between The World and Me*, p. 82-3

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Jason Rosenberg, *RH Sermon 5776*, “*The Yetzer of Racism*.”

the entire length of the march. On the march were African Americans, Native Americans, octogenarian Americans, over 200 rabbis, clergy of every stripe, one Sefer Torah, and hundreds of wood choppers and water carriers – all of us protected every step of the way by law enforcement officers, who marched with us, who marched because it is their duty and it is their service, many of whom volunteered for the assignment because of their own convictions.

I marched because of my inheritance, the choices of the generations of my family – for the good and the bad. In Vicksburg, Mississippi, my father's father opened up his home to a young, homeless, black teen in the 1930's. My mother's father in Paducah, Kentucky owned the only store downtown that allowed blacks to use the bathroom or get a drink of water. These stories are my inheritance, they compel me to march.

I am also a legacy to the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Daughters of the American Confederacy. My family has lived in the US South for seven generations. Surely, my South Carolina ascendants who were part of America's first Reform Jewish congregation also had a hand in the slavery of their day. Surely, the Mississippi, family plantation that was passed down for generations once used slaves in its fields. These too are my inheritance. These legacies also compel me to march.

I marched inspired by my colleagues who told me about marcher Keshia Thomas. Keshia Thomas is a black woman who has devoted herself to spreading the message among frustrated teens that violence never solves their problems. In 1996, the KKK tried to organize a rally in Ann Arbor, MI. Hundreds of people gathered to protest, Keshia among them. A Klansman, with a SS tattoo on his arm somehow ended up amidst the protesters, and people began to throw things at him and beat him. Keshia leapt forward and spread herself over the Klansman to protect him. A photographer captured the moment and the photo received national media attention. Keshia gained a reputation for peaceful resistance. Her message has transformed thousands. This last year she met young people in Baltimore after the death of Freddy Grey and the torching of a CVS store. "Look across the street," she said to them. "There's a Senior Home. What do you think those folks are thinking and feeling about you? Would you want to be in that home, and not feel safe going out on your street? Find another way to protest. Advocate peacefully with me!"

I marched because 50 years ago the rabbis who marched hand and hand with blacks put their lives and their careers at risk for the principals of their faith. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose rabbinate inspires mine, marched then. He taught: "Racism is worse than idolatry. Few of us seem to realize how insidious, ... how evil racism is. Few of us realize that racism is man's gravest threat to mankind."<sup>5</sup>

Fifty years ago those rabbis "chose life so that their descendants may live." I am their descendant; I am the beneficiary of the progress they made. Because they marched when we marched we had the protection of police rather than the billy clubs and fire hoses that they faced. Because they marched the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act became law.

Today that Voting Rights Act has been eviscerated by the Supreme Court who believes that the special provisions protecting minorities' rights are no longer necessary. North Carolina was the first State, literally days after the Voting Rights Act fell, to enact legislation restricting: voting registration, the number of polls where people can vote, early voting, and creating stringent voter ID requirements. Together with the redistricting that took place and is still being challenged in the courts, North Carolina has significantly stripped the voting rights of all voters, and particularly effected African Americans, students and the elderly. This too compels me to march.

I march because we have collectively and individually been subject to degradation as Jews, and I have been moved by the support of non-Jews who were with us when we were the water carriers and wood choppers. I remember like it was yesterday when Pastor, Dr. Art Ross at White Memorial Presbyterian Church addressed our congregation when we were worshipping in his sanctuary. Not only did he welcome us there on Yom Kippur, he apologized to us for the horrors that Christians committed during the Holocaust. I march because when the Kansas City shooter went on a rampage in the Jewish section of the city, a half a dozen clergy members, Baptist, Catholic, Muslim, & Presbyterian, showed up to our Passover Seder two days later, in the middle of the Christian Holy Week, to express their solidarity and support for our Jewish community.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.centralreform.org/sites/default/files/files/SERMON%205765-DISMANTLING%20RACISM.pdf>

Our Yom Kippur Torah portion calls us to stand together– to stand with the Jewish community, and to stand with the greater community, to stand with the chieftains and the water carriers. One way that I fulfill this commandment is through marching with those subjected to degradation. I acknowledge that not everyone is a marcher. Marching is but one way of many. It will take all of us from the chieftain to the water carrier standing to bring about the systemic change needed to end racism.

- You can read a book or an article about the oppressed
- You can listen to a podcast or TED Talk on the topic  
(Of course, I have a list of recommended resources waiting for you on the table in the foyer)
- You can advocate for the Re-invigoration of the Voting Rights Act. (And yes there are post cards available to help you do that right next to the resource page)
- You can join a dialogue and/or join an action group like the Interfaith Alliance or Congregations for Social Justice or create your own diverse group.
- You can speak up when you witness racial injustice.
- You can join our Social Action Committee; drop in for a meeting the third Tuesday of every month.

I do not pretend to have all the answers. I know that great minds in this room have even greater ideas and avenues for involvement and I implore you to share those with our community.

Today is the day to “Assemble the people, the heads of our tribes and chieftains... all the people from the cutter of your wood to the drawer of your water.”

*“Standing on the parted shores of history, we still believe what we were taught before ever we stood at Sinai’s foot; that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt; that there is a better place, a promised land; that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness. That there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together<sup>6</sup>.”*

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<sup>6</sup> Mishkan Tefilah

May these hallowed words from our liturgy inspire us to rise to the challenge of our day to shape the blessings generations to come will know.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon: May it Be God's Will*

*May We Do God's Will*