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Kol Rinah
Parashat Re'eh
August 19, 2017 / 27 Av 5777

For us here, what hurt so much about the last week of news about Charlottesville? The murder of a peaceful protestor, Heather Heyer? The deaths of two Virginia state troopers, Lt. H. Jay Cullen and Berke M.M. Bates? Was it the expressions of hate against people of color? Was it the anti-Semitic chants of “Jews will not replace us?” Was it the lack of forceful condemnation by our President of racist and anti-Semitic speech? Was it the desire to hold onto monuments glorifying generals who fought for the Confederacy, and thus for the continuation of slavery? Was it something else?

Many Jews, especially, felt a kind of visceral fear that to those in my generation, was unfamiliar and terrifying, and to others was all too familiar, and terrifying.

The pain and fear so many of us are feeling is real. And we need to be gentle with each other, and understand that so many of us are fragile and hurting and scared and angry now.

To feel safe, to feel a sense of security and comfort—this is why so many of us come to shul, why so many people are a part of faith communities. And it's crucial that we maintain this community as a place of safety, of comfort, of security in our scary, unsafe, uncomfortable, insecure world.

But there's another reason we come to shul, another reason people join faith communities like ours. And that's to grow—to be challenged and supported in growing in all different ways—to grow our spirit, our relationships, our compassion, our patience, our love, our faith, our future.

Growth we know requires struggle. I remember lying in bed, my legs aching, when I was maybe eleven years old, literally, from growing pains. Our own personal and familial narratives are the stories of our own growing pains—our struggles, our failures, and we hope, our successes—that have shaped us into who we are today.

Our patriarch Jacob's struggling, wrestling, with an angel, is a paradigmatic moment of growth for him that leads to his being renamed “Israel,” translated sometimes as “strugglers with God.”

What is the growth opportunity that requires our struggling, our wrestling, in and amidst this moment, this week, of pain and fear? There are, of course, many ways we need to grow, to challenge ourselves, but I want to focus particularly on monuments and statues, and about empathy.

The events in Charlottesville began because of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee astride a horse. The city had planned to remove the statue and white nationalists came to protest its removal.

While I've done a lot of reading and learning about race, whiteness, and anti-Semitism and their intersection, I must confess that until this week, I hadn't thought much about the movement to remove these kinds of monuments, and the efforts to rename buildings and places originally named after perpetrators and perpetuators of slavery. We were slaves in Egypt, but I was never a slave in America, so I could look at a Robert E. Lee statue, read the plaque, and keep walking. I have not been personally, affected, concerned, or threatened.

I've been asking myself this week though how I'd feel encountering a statue positively memorializing Hitler, or Himmler, or Goering, or Goebbels, in the place where I lived or went to school, at Flynn Park where my children play. I wouldn't just be offended. I'd be scared, because its presence would indicate that people want it there, that people in some way believed, and still believed in what it stood for. How would you feel having to walk by a statue of a man who you know believed you were not a human being, fit only for slavery, and when your body was used up, fit for slaughter?

We would never countenance a statue of a famous Nazi. So why have we, as Jews, as Americans, as people of faith and empathy, not fought to remove the symbols celebrating oppression of people of color?

Believe it or not, the Torah has something to say on the removal of idolatrous statues, and I want to acknowledge Rabbi Dr. Ryan Dulkan for a very brief post on Facebook mentioning the verse I'm about to quote. When we enter the land of Israel, "You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshiped their gods, whether on lofty mountains and on hills or under any luxuriant tree. Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site," we read in Deuteronomy chapter 12:2-3 earlier this morning.

We are to cut down the images abhorrent to us and to our God, **ואבדתם את שמם מן המקום ההוא**, "obliterating their name from that site."

The reason is that these pagan worship practices "are a seductive threat to Israel. If they are embraced at all, they will talk Israel out of [worshipping] God and out of a covenantal vision of social reality," writes Walter Brueggemann, a modern Protestant theologian and exegete. Put simply, these idols are dangerous to us as a society, because they threaten and undermine what we stand for, and are a temptation for us.

Moreover, I would say their very presence would stand in stark opposition to the pure monotheism of Deuteronomy. They would insult every fiber of our religious being.

It's not hard to see how Confederate symbols have become a snare, a focal point, a center around which to rally, for those who long for and pray for and work toward a world, or a return to a world, where people with white skin and pure European ancestry dominate. Of course, the sad irony is that we still live in that world, to a large degree.

Amidst our community's pain and fear and hurt, I will be struggling with my ignorance, my obliviousness, to the pain and fear and hurt caused by the memorials, and names, and statues, and symbols, and invite you to join me in that struggling. I'll be paying attention to the figures and names I see venerated around town. It's easy to Google someone, if you don't know much about them. I invite you to do the same.

Maybe one of us will notice something that needs to be changed, that will bring a small measure of healing, of love, of peace, and honest reckoning with the past we have not yet succeeded in obliterating from our places, and from our hearts.

Let me say a word about empathy. Empathy is feeling the pain of the other, not as your own, but as theirs, while still feeling it ourselves, in some sense simply and precisely because the other person is in pain. Our own pain and trauma and fear sometimes block our ability to feel empathy, to empathize.

Unfortunately, empathy might come to us Jews a little more naturally in this instance, because we know from our recent past how it feels to be targeted, to be persecuted, to be

dehumanized. We may need not to excuse, but to have a little more empathy for those who don't get this at such a gut level as we do.

But I'm challenging myself, and all of us, to grow, in empathy, and understanding, in our humanity, and in our Jewishness.

The responsibility here should not have to rest on the shoulders of those directly dehumanized, although they can be our guides. Do we want the responsibility of fighting anti-Semitism alone, or do we want allies? And isn't it nice when we don't even have to take the lead? For the same reason, we can't let these fights be fought only by people of color. Moreover, if we believe all people, with white skin and brown skin and black skin and every shade in between, are God's children, created in the divine image, if when we look into the eyes of another person, any other human being, we can see a flicker of God look backing at us through their eyes, then we must stand up to anyone or anything who says otherwise. Or else we blaspheme and defame God's creations, and God's very essence.

Yehi ratzon milfanecha, hashem elokheinu, veilokei avoeinu, vimoteinu, May it be your will, Lord our God, God of our fathers and mothers, source of life, that we may find the shelter, safety, and security, we need during the storm of these difficult days, and may we find also the strength and courage to struggle, and wrestle, and to grow in empathy for our fellow people, so that we may all, someday soon, live with dignity and pride, tranquility and peace. And let us say, Amen.

Shabbat shalom.