Juneteenth

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I am embarrassed to share with you that I only learned about the Juneteenth holiday recently. Juneteenth is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. It was on June 19, 1865, that Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston, Texas, with news that the war had ended and that the enslaved were now free. This was two and a half years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which had become official on January 1, 1863.

Over the years, Juneteenth has evolved from a local celebration in Galveston to an increasingly national celebration that includes rodeos, fishing, barbecuing, and baseball. Today it celebrates African American freedom and achievement, while encouraging continuous self-development and respect for all cultures.

But it wouldn't be until December 1865 that slavery would end officially in the United States with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. Juneteenth, then, is not a celebration of freedom, as Tema Smith asserts in an opinion piece in *The Forward*, but the commemoration of the potential of freedom.

This idea has sat with me for a few days. Even in 2019, when on paper and in practice everyone is equal and shares the same inalienable rights, we find an onslaught of racism and cultural divide that has become part of the zeitgeist of America. Names such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir

Rice now serve as constant reminders that despite the progress we have made, we seemingly take steps backward.

As Jews, we feel the prophetic mandate to lift up the fallen and fight for justice. We, too, have a history of enslavement and persecution for being different.

Rabbi Sharon Brous writes, “Most American Jews came to this country after the abolition of slavery, but we have thrived under a national economic system that was built on stolen land and stolen labor, a foundational wrong that has yet to be rectified. As survivors of generational trauma and beneficiaries of reparations granted after the Holocaust, Jews have a special obligation to help advance this conversation.” Even more so, a new study from Stanford University has found that Jews of color have been undercounted in population studies. As Ari Y. Kelman states, “To fail to account for the diversity of American Jewish communities is to misrepresent those very communities.”

In a world where Judaism is not defined by the color of our skin but by our commitment to faith and practice, it perhaps is clear that Juneteenth is not simply a holiday for African Americans. Perhaps, it is also a Jewish holiday. Each year, on Juneteenth, the potential of freedom is commemorated, and the potential of freedom can arguably be something that time and again has been taken from our reach.

But we cannot continue simply to commemorate the potential of freedom; rather, we should celebrate the hope, light, and love needed for true freedom to be granted. Racism violates the core Jewish principle that all human beings are

created *b'tselem Elohim*, in the divine image (Genesis 1:27), deserving of the dignity and value inherent in every human being. The events in our country over recent years remind us in a stark way that racism still threatens the promise of America. African Americans, Latinos, and other people of color face the constant threat of racial profiling and death, unreasonable restrictions and obstacles to voting, unequal access to high-quality education, and mass incarceration. All these things that we have seen so vividly demonstrate that we must renew and extend our commitment to pursue racial justice.

It was Viktor Frankl, the noted Holocaust survivor and psychologist, who spoke about our ultimate freedoms. He asserted that everything we may consider to be freedoms actually can be taken away from us, except one thing: our freedom to take a stand. Our freedom to act with dignity, be modern prophets, and engage in resistance and advocacy. The work of liberation for Black Americans is still a work in progress. And, as Tema Smith notes, it is our moral imperative as Jews to pray with our feet and stand shoulder to shoulder with all who are in bondage. Like our forebears who in the not-so-distant past marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we, too, must march. That is our freedom. That is the gift. That is our responsibility.

In his book *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Social Justice*, Paul Kivel describes what active support for people of color can look like. Just as economics influences everything we do, just as gender and gender politics influence everything we do, we must assume that racism is affecting our daily lives. He asks us to notice who speaks, what is said, and how things are done and described. Notice who isn't present when racist talk occurs. Notice code words for

race, and the implications of the policies, patterns, and comments that are being expressed. He reminds us that racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of color and consolidating power and privilege for white people. He charges us to reflect upon how racism has changed over time and how it has subverted or resisted challenges. He, too, reminds us to take a stand, to decide what is important to challenge and what's not, to not confuse a battle with a war. And most of all, as Rabbi Tarfon teaches, it is not always our obligation to complete a task—but it is our obligation to take part in its completion.

And so, we pray: Help us to see, to hear, and to know the injustices that keep us from redemption. Like Moses when he comes upon the burning bush, make it so that we cannot look away. Enable us to hear the voices of our family, our friends, and our community members when they tell us how they are oppressed. Grant us wisdom and compassion to eradicate the experience of the captive, so that we are all free. Give us courage, energy, and humility to embrace those among us whom we too easily label as "other." Let us transform other into one another. In so doing, we bring justice and healing to our world.