

“The Boulder of Racism, the Rock of Justice”

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The southeast wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art boasts an impressive Greek and Roman Art collection. As you stroll down the main hall, marble statues greet you with bashful smiles and virile poses. Centuries ago, their hard stone was sanded to a perfect, soft white, its bright glow dazzling all these years later.

But when was the last time you noticed that the same marble, the same white stone, was also beneath your feet? Imagine if the floor’s hard-worked marble tiles could speak to the marble statues?¹ Would they be jealous? Angry? Depressed? The marble was carved from the same brilliant stone, hewn high in the peaks of the Italian alps, but depending on when it was cut, and by whom, it either became a showcased statue or a timeworn pathway. The same marble, different lives.

In August, the NYTimes Magazine had a stunning expose on Italian Marble². The author gave the stone an almost human portrayal: “the story of Italian marble is the story of difficult motion: violent, geological, haunted by failure and

¹ This thought was inspired by the story on this webpage:

<https://www.wattpad.com/52131972-collection-of-inspirational-stories-marble-statue>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/magazine/the-majestic-marble-quarries-of-northern-italy.html?mcubz=0>

ruin and lost fortunes, marred by severed fingers, crushed dreams, crushed men. Rarely has a material so inclined to stay put been wrenched so insistently out of place and carried so far from its source; every centimeter of its movement has had to be earned.”

Reading this, I instantly I thought of our Yom Kippur gathering. This whole day is made holy by the attempt to yank us out of place and pry us from our depravity; and we resist it every second along the way. It’s like every prayer is another tug on the stone around our hearts. The words are meant to cut into our core and wrench us even just a centimeter closer to the right path.

The Day of Atonement pushes this agenda by eliciting various emotions; the most powerful of which are regret and guilt. But expressing regret and guilt are not enough. Our liturgy tells us: *the day of atonement does not atone until humans have made peace with one another*. Regret is not an apology. Guilt is about me and my feelings. A true apology is about you and your feelings.

Social activist Diane Flinn (in a conversation with the Southern Poverty Law Center)³ puts it this way: “Guilt allows...people to maintain the status quo. Guilt creates paralysis. Guilt transfers the responsibility...By saying, "I feel so guilty, so bad," it puts the other person in a position of comforting. The other person is then

³ <https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/white-antiracism-living-the-legacy>

silenced, must reposition or restate their truth. Or worse -- maintain their truth and risk being viewed as mean, insensitive and angry.”

According to Flinn, guilt is where we get stuck. By admitting guilt, we believe we absolve ourselves. We feel better because we wipe our hands clean and leave the offended party to deal with our emotions – instead of us truly dealing with theirs.

Yom Kippur looks to correct this failure in apology. We recite *ashamnu* – a prayer in which we feel the weight of our sins, pounding our chests to break the stone-like hardness around our hearts and truly feel the hurt we have caused. Then there is *al chet*, a litany of transgressions, straightforwardly expressed as facts. *Al chet* ends with a request of God: *For all these, God of pardon, pardon us, forgive us!* We offer an apology and we request that God show us a new way forward.

This morning, as a community, and as individuals, we have an apology to make. For years we have felt the guilt of our segregated society, where people of color are excluded from employment and learning opportunities; they are victims of police brutality and disproportionately imprisoned in our bloated prison system. We say we regret these facts, but we have not yet made an apology.

For those of us who are white, we feel the shame, we may be disappointed with the current state of affairs. But we don't know how to make an apology. We might even balk at the notion that we have to, thinking that “I, a liberal Jewish

woman, I am not a perpetrator of racism!” But I am white and as such, I have internalized the privilege and prejudices that come with that. I may not have owned a slave, I may not have legislated the bigotry of Jim Crow, but I have been complicit – and benefitted from - housing discrimination, gerrymandering, disproportionately harsh legal punishments, and racial profiling.

The system is rigged, and we live and work in that system. We didn’t create it, but we can’t ignore it.

Torah teaches us that the guilt of the parents is passed on to the 3rd and even 4th generation. One generation teaches the next its bad habits, its overt prejudices, its unjust employment and legislative practices, and its racial anxieties.

Yet this sin of ours is not etched in stone eternally. We can pry the *aveira* of racism from the rock of our souls. The Prophet Ezekiel (18:19-23) assures us that if the next generation does “what is just and right... The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them.”

And then he reveals God’s own self-reflection: “*Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?* declares the Sovereign God...[no,] rather, *I am pleased when they turn from their ways and live.*”

It is time for everyone, from you and me to the President of the United States, to stop pretending that racism is not deeply embedded into our everyday lives. We can't just regret the history of racism in our country, we must make an active apology for it. This is when we turn to our neighbor and say, "let's live differently." This is when we tackle police brutality and racial profiling. We dismantle the awful, uniquely American practice of mass incarceration.

In our own homes, we tackle that overt and subtle ways we teach bias to our children. Ezekiel implores us – if we break the cycle of unjust action, the guilt can be alleviated. Until we truly live differently, the guilt of our country's past is still passed down through us.

Again, of all things, Italian marble serves as an incredible symbol: "What we admire as pristine white stone was born hundreds of millions of years ago in overwhelming darkness. Countless generations of tiny creatures lived, died and drifted slowly to the bottom of a primordial sea, where their bodies were slowly compressed by gravity, layer upon layer upon layer, tighter and tighter, until eventually they all congealed and petrified into the interlocking white crystals we know as marble."

America is beautiful, but it is built on the stolen bodies of slaves and the back-breaking work of immigrants who continue to face hate and discrimination.

All Americans are made of the same beautiful marble, but some have been given places of privilege while others have been relegated to the margins.

So, how do we break this cycle? How do we show we're sorry and start to build a better future? We're not talking about a pediatric sorry, the kind you learned in pre-school that by simply admitting guilt – "I'm sorry I pushed you" - you were instantly relieved of it. I'm talking about an adult sorry. I'm talking about moving from perpetrator to ally.

If you are white, that means taking account of the overt *and* clandestine privilege you have. We need to know when to pick it up and lug it aside so someone else can step through. So let's explore exactly what an ally is and, more importantly, how to be one.

Consider that after the presidential election, some folks started to wear a safety pin. It meant different things to different people. On a whole, it meant that "the wearer was a "safe" ally, ready to stand up for anyone who might be the target of abuse, whether verbal or physical."⁴ It was instantly controversial. Some saw it as an "outward symbol of sympathy" and a mark of resistance, while others saw it as self-indulgent and empty, a "self-administered pat on the back for being a decent human being."

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/15/safety-pins-solidarity-symbol-or-emblem-of-white-guilt/?utm_term=.e299a1a317ac

It would seem that the safety pin, which went viral, and then seemingly nowhere, is the perfect way to teach about being an ally. As writer Demetria Lucas D'Oyley put it, “Actually *create* a safe space instead of ...designating *yourself* one.”⁵ Simply put: ally is not a noun, it is a verb.

Invictus Animus – a queer writer who wrestles with being queer *and* white – writes⁶, “being an ally is not about me: it’s about the community I support. It’s about shutting up, showing up, educating myself on the downtime from public sources available for me, and not taking up space with my privilege... I am not proud to *be* an ally. I am proud to be *behaving* like one. My behavior is what *helps* oppressed communities, not my identifier. I don’t need my own flag to help others in their struggles.”

What about I appreciate about Animus’ perspective is that they are part of the LGBTQ community, and therefore one of those people impacted by prejudice. Yet, they are also white, and they understand that in regards to race issues, their gender identity does not exclude them from figuring out how to behave as an ally to people of color.

And this is where the Jewish community’s involvement in racial justice comes in. Jews have, for decades, identified strongly with the Civil Rights

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/15/safety-pins-solidarity-symbol-or-emblem-of-white-guilt/?utm_term=.e299a1a317ac (emphasis mine)

⁶ <http://darahoffmanfox.com/why-ally-is-verb-not-a-noun/>

Movement. We simply look to the Passover story – our own account of liberation. We look to the racially-fueled anti-semitism that has impacted Jews since ancient times and we see modern racism as cut from the same cloth. It is! Not to mention – close to 20% of Jews in America are from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds.⁷

Yet we cannot ignore that, for perhaps the first time in Jewish history, we are considered part of the white majority. Most of us enjoy the societal privilege that comes with light-colored skin.

Yes, anti-semitism still rears its ignorant head. Yes, the neo-Nazis of Charlottesville chanted “Jews will not replace us” and swastikas seem to be in fashion again.

But that does not mean that we don’t have work to do in figuring out how to behave as an ally to minority communities – Black, LGBTQ+, Latinx, and more. I urge you today to adopt the old improvisational drama stand-by – “yes, and.” Yes, Jews have been victimized, *and* many of us are white by society’s standards. Yes, I’m a woman and worry about sexism, *and* I’m a white, cis-gender woman, which also comes with its own privilege to be grappled with.

Yom Kippur’s prayers remind us of this fact – we are never exempt from *teshuvah* – true repentance. If we are not personally guilty, then we are complicit.

⁷ http://www.bechollashon.org/population/counting_color/counting_color.php

If we merely identify as an ally but don't take action to act like one, then we might as well be the perpetrator.

Paul Kivel, author of *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Social Justice*, offers guidelines for how we can do better. Here are a few things (in his words) we can do starting today:

- 1) **Assume racism is everywhere, every day.** Just as economics influence everything we do, just as gender and gender politics influence everything we do, assume that racism is affecting your daily life. We assume this because it's true, and because a privilege of being white is the freedom to not deal with racism all the time. We have to learn to see the effect that racism has. Notice who speaks, what is said, 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. You already notice the skin color of everyone you meet—now notice what difference it makes.
- 2) **Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.** Racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of color and consolidating power and privilege for white people.
- 3) **Notice how racism is denied, minimized, and justified.**

- 4) **Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism, and other forms of injustice.**
- 5) **And, support the leadership of people of color.** Do this consistently, but not uncritically.”

These guidelines can be extended to the other minority communities and women, too.

I don't purport to be an expert in this area. I'm talking to you about it because I'm still learning – and this talk is part of my education. I've always identified myself as an ally, but I, like all of us, can do a better job of living it.

In all my research, one thing I appreciated most was the strong message that in figuring out how to behave like an ally, there will be misunderstanding and mistakes. Part of this work is expanding our capacity for accepting mistakes when they are made.

For example, a tremendous thing is happening today. Today is the March for Racial Justice on the National Mall in Washington. When the date was announced, Jews doing the work of racial justice were hurt. Scheduling on Yom Kippur meant that many of us could not lend our support. We felt cast out and unappreciated. In an effort to be good allies, we reasoned, it's not our march, it's not about us. But it still hurt – we wanted to know that we were wanted. For many, an existential crisis erupted.

Then the march organizers issued a very public apology. It read: “Choosing this date, we now know, was a grave and hurtful oversight on our part. It was unintentional and we are sorry for this pain as well as for the time it has taken for us to respond. Our mistake highlights the need for our communities to form stronger relationships... We have learned from our Jewish friends that Yom Kippur is a day of making amends and of asking and receiving forgiveness. We hope that our sincere apology will be received with compassion, and that we will build a stronger relationship among all our communities as a result.

We are marching in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters who are observing the holiest of days on the Jewish calendar. Holding fast to Jewish tradition is also an act of resistance, in the face of growing anti-Semitism. We recognize and lift up the intersection of anti-Semitism and racism perpetrated by white supremacists, whether they wave Confederate flags, don swastikas, beat and kill people on the streets in Charlottesville, deface Holocaust memorials, or threaten and harass members of our communities and our religious and community spaces. And we recognize the need for all of us to work together in the face of an administration that condones widespread oppression of all those most vulnerable among us... we hope that on that holy day, Jews in synagogues across our country will pray for racial justice - lifting up black and brown people, Jewish and non-Jewish - in

hope for safety and wholeness. Spiritual sustenance is an essential part of this work for justice. We're committed to working together with the Jewish community throughout the year and every year until true justice for all of us is won."

I believe this was a sincere and powerful apology. And I believe it was our responsibility to accept it without ceding support. A true ally moves out of the way.

This is more important now than ever. This Yom Kippur, we have a President who uses harsh, vitriolic language against black athletes who kneel in peaceful resistance, while he offers the benefit of the doubt to violet protestors in Charlottesville. Sports players are "sons-of-bitches," tiki-torch bearers are "fine people."

Today, may we know the true meaning of apology. Let us begin, or continue, the work of critically assessing our privilege. Let us pry ourselves from the heavy rock, formed from centuries of bigotry, and create something new and beautiful; a society worth celebrating because it is fair, just, and holy. Amen.

Closing remarks

“From the Place Where We are Right” by Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

From the place where we are right

flowers will never grow

in the Spring.

The place where we are right

is hard and trampled

like a yard.

But doubts and loves

dig up the world

like a mole, a plough.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

where the ruined

house once stood.

We can muster the strength to lift up the heavy stone of racism and bigotry that weighs down our country. We cannot stand unmoved like a deep deposit of marble in the Italian alps. We must lift up the rock, let the grass breathe and let it grow.

We do this through true apology and *behaving* as an ally. We do this through educating ourselves, looking critically at our own behaviors, and, even despite mistakes, committing ourselves to a new way forward.