

## What Really Matters

Second Day Rosh HaShana 5781 / September 20, 2020

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We gather this Rosh HaShana at a difficult time. We gather in the context of a virus which continues, relentlessly, to attack our world, in the context of a technology which many of us had never heard of before. We are “*oyske-zoomed*”. A strange word, Zoom, never heard of in the past, is now part of every conversation in which we are engaged. In our wildest dreams, we would never have anticipated our lives upended as they have been, our mobility so limited, and our feeling of isolation so profound. Yet, here we are.

I begin, therefore, by acknowledging the immediate reality of our lives. But I want to also remind us that, even with the difficult context in which we are gathered, using the latest technology to enable us to be together, the world around us continues to turn.

Even as life is on hold, in many ways, life goes on in other ways. Despite the crisis of a pandemic, we have been confronted by ingrained prejudice and inequalities as our society is being torn and tattered before us. The divisiveness and mean-spirited politics cast shadows, which are both painful and embarrassing, over this land.

But, of greater distress to me is a different challenge. I do not mean to diminish the importance of choosing the next President of the US. But, for better or

worse, that choice will be made, and we will move on. Yet, the situation in this country regarding racial discrimination is one which cannot be voted away. It cannot be dealt with easily or superficially. It cannot be ignored or tolerated if we are to change the situation. And, on this holy and powerful day, I feel that we have no choice but to begin that work.

I want to share with you a few thoughts about this, and I begin by framing the issue of racial inequality in Jewish terms. And those terms and sources are numerous and clear. And the condemnation and unwavering repudiation of any form of racism or discrimination is a mandate of Jewish life today, as it has always been.

The story of creation is very much a part of our celebration of Rosh HaShana. Several times, specifically when we blow the shofar, we say, *hayom harat olam* / today is the celebration of the birthday of the world, the day the world was created. It is for that reason that this holiday emphasizes the notion of beginnings, of starting over with a clean slate: We apologize. We do *t'shuvah* and we promise to do better in the year to come. The new year is a time to start over.

Beyond this well-known theme, our rabbinic tradition scrutinizes the story of Creation, extracting lessons and engaging us, as we start anew, to focus on the deeper meaning embedded in the Creation story and directing us not to overlook these important notions.

The Mishna (*Sanhedrin* 4:5) makes the following observation: How great is God?! Even greater than the Roman Caesar (which to the Romans was unthinkable, if not blasphemous): When the Caesar mints a coin, every coin is identical. But, when our God creates a human being, everyone is unique.

Part and parcel of the nature of humanity is the notion of the uniqueness of every person. And part and parcel of what it means to be a Jew is to proclaim and demand that every human being be treated with respect and valued as holy and unique. None of us are the same.

And more importantly, the differences between us are reflections of the hand of God. If, as the Mishnah contends, we are all created by God, then those differences are the parts of us which are the clearest reflections of God. And here the contemporary issue of racism must be addressed.

It is contrary to Jewish law and belief that one should be denigrated, disparaged, or devalued because of their color, distinctive physical characteristics, or beliefs. Regardless of whether we speak of skin colors which reflect one's race, one's physical features which are different from our own, one's sexual orientation, which is part of how that person was created, or one's national origins, from a Jewish perspective, these differences are to be honored and respected. It must be a tenet of our faith that racism and other forms of hate, whether focused on African Americans, Asians, Arabs, members of the LGBTQ community or others are to be rejected and eradicated.

Racism, as you know, has become “front and center” news again. I say, “again” because, as far back as I can remember, racism has been part of American Life. Of course, racism and other forms of hate have been part of every society, from ancient times through the present. But, for me it became most prominent in 1967.

As a kid growing up in the suburbs of Detroit, the only African American I knew was the woman who came to our house to clean every week. Ophelia took the bus from her home in the city to our house. It was an hour’s ride. Busses were vehicles, I assumed, to carry African Americans from their homes to ours’, to transport children from the all-black areas in which they lived, to attend school with us, which was, otherwise, all white.

I remember how, over the summer of 1967, the black community, localized in downtown Detroit, rioted in response to incidents of police brutality. I recall my parents and other adults berating blacks, who were always referred to as “they”:

**They** are burning down **their** own neighborhoods. Don’t **they** realize what **they** are doing?

I recall watching and being confused. I watched dramatic footage of arson and looting in Detroit. I felt totally unaffected and separate from what was happening a few miles from my home. Racism was not on my radar. But even more, I could

not understand the notion of police brutality. Police were there to protect and defend, not to attack and brutalize. My how things have changed! (Not)

Today, the same phenomenon of police brutality against blacks has become, not only tolerated but expected by the black community. An African American friend confessed that he drives a nice car and always, always wears a sport jacket or suit when driving, believing that there is a better chance that he will not get pulled over if he is in a nice car and wearing nice clothes.

Still, he has been pulled from his car and had a gun pointed at his head... six times. If one questions the notion of systemic and ingrained racism in this country, decide by asking yourself:

How many times have you been pulled from your car by the police for a random search and, with gun drawn, asked to step away from your car?

Today, there is a difference between what transpired in 1967 or earlier in other places, and what is occurring today. Today, unlike in 1967, the sense of outrage, common-cause and empathy is felt, not just within the Black community, but within society in general. Today we are all much more aware and attuned to the systemic racism which pervades our society. But, if permitted a degree of optimism, there are reasons to think that this time the outcome may be different.

Unlike other times when our responses were limited to tongue-clicking and shaking our heads in disapproval, today, as Jews we can decide to stand together,

shoulder to shoulder, with the Black community. In the past, we have not taken our roles seriously as Americans. We have, through our inaction and apathy, abrogated one of the most sacred responsibilities we have as Jews. We have forgotten to protect the sanctity of all life.

As Americans, we have also forgotten that those who rule, those who adjudicate, those chosen to legislate and those elected to serve, work for us. This country is of the people, for the people and by the people. They neither own nor control the freedoms we have as citizens of this great country. We have the right and the obligation to rectify the evils we see, to deny power to those who abuse it and to elect new leaders when those elected in the past let us down. And we must do better. But how? Where to begin?

My first premise is that we cannot begin to heal ourselves or our nation by addressing long-held, internalized hatreds of individuals. I do not believe that there is any systematic way to reverse these sorts of inbred prejudices.

It is, to be sure, within the nature of human beings to be wary and cautious of those who are different. This explains, to some degree, the natural fears internalized by our children, even at a very young age. But understanding is not excusing.

A long-time first-grade teacher, my neighbor and friend, Rita Ross, would ask her students a “question of the day” every day. One question she posed to her first-grade class was, “What is a stranger?” And she remembers some of the

responses. One child said, “A stranger is someone to stay away from.” Another said, “They are people you don’t know whom might want to give you candy and then they’ll grab you”. “A stranger is a bad person”. And the unspoken truth for those for whom blacks are strangers, blacks are bad people.

No parent taught these children explicitly these answers or reinforced these attitudes. To be sure, children nurture their natural instincts. But they also interpret and incorporate our attitudes and even the subtleties of our actions or language as they form their opinions. The attitudes of adults have become solidified over time. But we still have a chance with children: We need to begin with our children, to act, consciously and confidently, with the awareness that **what we do matters**.

1. **What We Do Matters:** If we want to address the scourge of racism, we must become ambassadors and examples of acceptance of all people, especially those different from ourselves. Our actions speak loudest for us.

I have spoken with two different communities, the community of Bishop Hayward Smith in West Philadelphia, and with the Black Jewish Community in Mount Airy. I will work with them on this challenge. We must learn how to normalize those relationships and to remove the communal barriers of race from our social vocabularies. But we must work individually as well.

Let’s be honest. We live in neighborhoods that are filled with people who look more or less like we do. We socialize with people like us. We engage

in conversation with people like us. So, here is the question: Are we ready to go beyond ourselves and consider entering and engaging those segments of American Society from which we are different from us? Are we ready to reject the notion that blacks are strangers?

I am not directing you to doing *tzedakah* work. I suggest something much simpler and more profound: If you want to do something to end racism, begin at home.

Consider a friendship with a person of another race. We have members of our congregation who are Black. Get to know them or someone else, not simply as an African American. Reach out to a person of color as a person who, perhaps, has a different story to tell, who came from a place you have never been, who has lived and had experiences different from your own. Ask about that.

Do this for yourself. Do it for your children. Model for them what a person does when they meet a stranger or a person different from you. We can respond with curiosity. But we can also extend kindness for, to solve this problem, we must begin by realizing: What we do matters.

2. **What We Say Matters:** Words matter. Our belief in God has as its origin, words.

*Baruch She-amar v'Haya ha-Olam / Praised is God who created the world through his words.*



Jewish tradition reveres the word. Words have the power to create. Words can also harm and destroy when used cruelly to denigrate or delegitimize.

Racist jokes matter. When you say, “I was only kidding”, it does not undo damage or give you a free pass. No matter if you are a well-known rapper or a star receiver in the NFL, “I’m sorry. I did not think that this would be offensive” does not undo the damage. Those jokes, comments or words not only teach others about who we really are. Those jokes teach our children to see less value in those about whom we joke. The expressions we use, the terms we employ to describe our world, can become lessons about the acceptability of devaluing certain groups or races. When our elderly relatives use derogatory words to describe people of color, they may not think that they are cruel or discriminatory, but they give their approval to other instances of racial discrimination.

Do not joke about another’s race, orientation, or religion. And when you hear it from someone else, shut it down. Tell them to stop or simply walk away. Remember: What we say matters.

3. **Finally, What We Believe Matters:** As Jews, we do not inherit a creed of faith or catechism. Our faith in God stems from our partnership with the Divine. We believe that human beings are the pinnacle of God’s creation of the world. It is our care for the world and our partnership with God which assures the continuity of the world and reminds us that we are all God’s

children, Jews and non-Jews, blacks and whites, people of all races and creeds. Believing in the holiness of all life, acknowledging that each of us is connected to God, is the foundational concept which gives our lives meaning and assures us that every life in this world matters.

I have understood all along that racism stems from the denial of the holiness of every human life and, that holiness is not limited to one nation or race. At a time in American History when we have witnessed again the scourge of racism and brutality reserved, in so many cases, for Blacks, we must, again, proclaim loudly and clearly that black lives matter.

That said, unlike many of my colleagues, Jewish and not, I have declined the offer of a “Black Lives Matter” sign for our synagogue. Those signs, which we have all seen, are intended to be displayed prominently and declare solidarity with the African American community. Were that the only message of the sign, I would have been first in line to receive that sign for our synagogue. We have no sign, however, and I feel compelled to explain why.

Black lives matter, period. I and we believe that passionately. It is a proclamation, reproduced on signs and billboards where-ever we go, which, to most, is a declaration of solidarity with the Black community. But dig a bit deeper and you will find that proclamation has become laden with a variety of other political causes and connotations, of which most are not aware. As your rabbi, I feel compelled to share this information with you.

Among the causes which have been attached to that slogan is the notion which suggests that just as blacks are subject to police brutality and systemic racism in this country, the same could be said about the treatment of Palestinians by Israelis. This proposition, enshrined in the 2016 Charter of Black Lives Matter, suggests that Israelis do not value the lives of Palestinians in the same way that the police did not value the life of George Floyd. This is the nature of the Black Lives Matter **political** movement and many of its leaders, including Palestinian and BDS activist, Linda Sarsour and Lewis Farrakhan, the virulently anti-Semitic leader of the Nation of Islam.

I have asked my rabbinic colleagues why they have backed the BLM, which welcomes to its ranks and embraces those who are so deeply entrenched in anti-Israel and anti-Semitic campaign. I find their answer troubling. Their answer is that **if** we want to get Blacks in this country to listen to our concerns about anti-Semitism, we must put “our” issue on the back burner while we take care of racial discord. We must first support them in order to gain the credibility as supporters of BLM before the case of anti-Semitism is broached. I simply cannot do that.

For Jews to put anti-Semitism on the back burner in any context constitutes an abrogation of Jewish leadership and a rejection of the responsibility we have, to stand up for own. I rejected the offer of a sign, not because I disagree with the mission to fight racism and secure equality for all in this nation. I reject the sign because I do not want anyone, including BLM, to suggest that I or we have put anti-Semitism on any back burner. If Jews do not shine a light on, and stand, vocally,

explicitly and without compromise against anti-Semitism, who then will stand up for us?

**And this is my point:** Racial discrimination and anti-Semitism are inextricably connected. The holiness and uniqueness of every person must be a standard for all: **We must stand up against racism and they must stand up against anti-Semitism.** Racism and anti-Semitism are both examples of institutionalized hate. Each is a denial of the most basic principle of our shared humanity and of holiness of all life. I am waiting for the rejection of anti-Semitism from BLM before giving it my full and unwavering support.

But, in the meantime, what can we do? What can we do about the future of our country, about racism, anti-Semitism, and hate? We can do a lot. And frankly, we need to do a lot since, I believe, that the future of our society will rise, or fall based on how we respond to hate.

1. We have the power and the right to choose our leaders. By voting in the upcoming elections, we can elect candidates who will fight anti-Semitism, racism, and hate, leadership which can strengthen us by bringing us together on this and on many other issues.
2. Individually we also have the power to upend prejudice and undo hatred, by beginning with our children, and by creating homes and schools which are “no bullying” zones and “no hate” zones.

3. And we must commit, individually and collectively, to get rid of hate, to get rid of racism, anti-Semitism, and every other form of hate and in every form of its transmission. Because when this world is devoid of hate, the world we yearn for will emerge.