

***Am I A Racist?*¹**

Ashamnu – We abuse, we betray, we are cruel, we destroy, we embitter, we falsify, we gossip, we hate, we insult, we jeer, we kill, we lie, we mock, we neglect, we oppress, we pervert, we quarrel, we rebel, we steal, we transgress, we are unkind, we are violent, we are wicked, we are extremists, we yearn to do evil, we are zealous for bad causes, leading others astray.

“*Ashamnu*” gives voice to our individual sins, giving us the cover, comfort and healing of confessing as part of the community. But *Ashamnu* also names sins that many of us have not committed. Together, each of us takes responsibility for the sins of the collective, our people.

Our traditions reflect the community’s longings, regrets, prayers, and the benefits and consequences of our actions. The community as a collective will rise or fall together, held accountable for the actions of its members.

Today, I’d like to talk about collective responsibility for the suffering of African Americans, hundreds of years in the making, and now perhaps, at a moment of truth.

It can be difficult to hear this as White Jews. We rightly view as ourselves as good people, attuned to living our values, often very well. We don’t believe ourselves to be racists -- we are caring people. But collectively, we have neglected to notice the depth of suffering of African Americans that has

¹ With ideas inspired by sermons shared by several RRA colleagues; and collected readings assembled by Benjamin Levenson, my son

continued while we have thrived. As Abraham Joshua Heschel once said in the opening address at the first conference on Religion and Race in 1963, "Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

In a very powerful sermon given by John Metta, entitled "*I, **Racist***"², he talked about his favorite aunt who is White, comparing her perspective to that of his sister, who is Black. His sister opined, "**The only difference between people in The North and people in The South is that down here, at least people are honest about being racist.**" His white aunt is hurt by the suggestion that people like her, a northerner, a liberal, a good person who has Black family members, could be called a racist. Since she doesn't experience racism, it is not real to her. Nor does it dawn on her that the very fact that she moved away from an increasingly Black neighborhood to live in a White suburb might itself be an aspect of racism." Metta opines, "better schools" exclusively means "whiter schools." To his aunt, the suggestion that "people in The North are racist" is experienced as an attack on her as a *racist*.

This may hit home for us too. Eric Goldstein's book, *The Price of Whiteness*³, documents how complex the race issue has become for Jews. For much of American history, up to the 20th century, race was a description that designated nationalities of immigrant populations. In the 20th century, race came to refer specifically to skin color. This has created a confusing and uncomfortable reality for Jews. In exploring the complicated intersections of "race" and Jewish-American identity, Goldstein explores how Jewish

² <https://ic-thsppl.squarespace.com/thsppl-articles/2017/4/14/i-racist?rq=i%20racist>

³ https://www.amazon.com/Price-Whiteness-Jews-American-Identity/dp/0691136319/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1506379043&sr=1-1&keywords=eric+goldstein

immigrants gradually began to understand themselves as "white" (i.e., fully European) when most of America did not. Goldstein writes that he has framed this book not "as a study of how Jews became white but as one that explores how Jews negotiated their place in a complex racial world." While we have long identified with the underdog, having been there ourselves countless times, still, America gave us the opportunity to be largely accepted among the establishment -- an establishment that has supported institutional and cultural racism for centuries.

American Jews are quick to recall our active role in the civil rights movement. Yet, African Americans have not come away with the same perception of the alliance between us. We marched in Selma, but our role is not viewed as having been central, as we like to recall it. The recent movie *Selma* depicted the march without our beloved sage and activist, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched alongside Dr. King.

How could that be? What is the disconnect? First, we have to understand how our entry into being treated as "white" has fueled distance if not resentment.

- Consider these facts about the reality of Black life in America as listed in 2015: Indicative of the segregation that still exists in our country, three quarters of Whites don't have any non-White friends.
- Median income for Black households is less than 60% of that of White ones.
- Black households in the U.S. have accumulated less than one-tenth of the wealth of White households.
- Home ownership is far less for Black Americans than White.

- The unemployment rate for Blacks is twice the rate of Whites.
- One in four Blacks live in poverty while fewer than one in ten Whites do.
- Over the past 25 years, the wealth gap between Blacks and Whites has nearly tripled.
- There are only six Black CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.
- There is one Black person on the *Forbes* 400 richest Americans list.
- Five times as many Whites use drugs as Blacks, yet Blacks are sent to prison for drug offenses at ten times the rate.
- Ten percent of Americans believe small business owners should be free to not serve or do business with Blacks, on religious grounds.
- There are huge disparities between Blacks and Whites in views about the fairness of policing, the judicial system, economic opportunity, and government- fundamental systems of America.⁴

Rabbi Irwin Kula commented, “Some White people may read this list and feel resentful that we are being blamed though we aren't racists. Some of us read this list and feel that Black people need to take more personal responsibility - or feel that White people have grievances, too. And some of us read this list and say: Yea, there are so many racists in this country. No matter who we are, the fact that millions of American citizens are devastated and traumatized means we're all implicated in this drama.”

It is important for us to understand, as Metta comments, “Martin Luther King did not end racism. Racism is...a 12 year old child being shot for playing with a toy gun in a state where it is legal to openly carry firearms. ... But racism is

⁴ Irwin Kula, “Where is Dr King’s Dream Now?” <http://thewisdomdaily.com/where-is-dr-kings-dream/>

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even more subtle than that. *Racism is the fact that "White" means "normal" and that anything else is different.* The system was made for White people, so White people don't have to think about living in it.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel said⁵, “Embarrassment not only precedes religious commitment, it is the touchstone of religious existence. What is the truth of the human being? The lack of pretention, the acknowledgement of opaqueness, shortsightedness, inadequacy. But truth also demands rising, striving, for the goal is both within and beyond us.”

Metta points to an uncomfortable perception within the Black community, “*The entire discussion of race in America centers around the protection of White feelings.* The reality of thousands of innocent people raped, shot, imprisoned, and systematically disenfranchised are less important than the suggestion that a single White person might be complicit in a racist system.”

A couple years ago I read a book that transformed my understanding of the African American experience in America. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson⁶ chronicles an important chapter in American history: the decades-long migration of Blacks who fled the South for northern and western cities in search of a better life. From 1915 to 1970, this exodus of almost six million people changed the face of America.

⁵ <https://dinascommonplace.wordpress.com/2015/10/03/abraham-joshua-heschel-excerpt-from-what-is-man/>

⁶ https://www.amazon.com/Warmth-Other-Suns-Americas-Migration/dp/0679763880/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1506380972&sr=1-1&keywords=the+warmth+of+the+other+sun

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Wilkerson tells this story through the lives of three individuals and their families: a woman who in 1937 left sharecropping and prejudice in Mississippi for Chicago; a man who fled Florida in 1945 for Harlem; and a third man who left Louisiana in 1953 to pursue a medical career in California. She documents their harrowing escapes from communities in the South where lynchings were common and most blacks lived as if enslaved as sharecroppers and farm workers, and were threatened just by walking in the streets of their towns and were not permitted to leave -- unless in the secret cover of darkness. They established new lives in colonies that grew into ghettos, even as they changed these cities with southern food, faith, and culture.

I highly recommend this book and we can discuss it further in the future.

Racism persists because we haven't talked about its most insidious roots and manifestations, built into the very fabric of American culture and institutions. Whether it is Blacks dying in troubling events now publicized via cell phone cameras and social media or the athletes kneeling at the sounding of our national anthem -- both are deeply troubling but clear *wake-up calls*. We can't go back to sleep now -- the evidence of institutionalized, unconscious racism -- and persistent ugly conscious hatefulness -- is right in our faces now. It is a moment of truth.

Here is the reality all Americans must face: *Ashamnu*, we have sinned.

There are close to **20 people of color in prison for every white person**. Following the massacre in a Charleston church, a headline from The

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Independent⁷ observes: "*Charleston shooting: Black and Muslim killers are 'terrorists' and 'thugs'. Why are white shooters called 'mentally ill'?*"

Metta comments on race in the media and popular culture, “White people are good as a whole, and only act badly as individuals. People of color, especially Black people are seen as fundamentally bad...Racism is so deeply embedded in this country not because of the racist right-wing radicals who practice it openly, *it exists because of the silence and hurt feelings of liberal America.*”

Ashamnu, we have sinned.

And yet, as Jews, we have a unique appreciation for the experience of Blacks in this country. We’ve been through enough persecution and discrimination to know it when we see it.

Rabbi Michael Rothbaum wrote about how history begets empathy. He retold that just a hundred years ago there were race riots against Jews, screeds from the New York City Police Commissioner against criminal tendencies in “the Hebrew Race.” Rothbaum writes: “In the Unetaneh Tokef, we say of God: Tizkor kol-haNishkachot. “You remember everything we’ve forgotten.” Have we [Ashkenazi-Americans] forgotten our history as genetic scapegoats?”⁸

⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/charleston-shooting-black-and-muslim-killers-are-terrorists-and-thugs-why-are-white-shooters-called-10330714.html>

⁸ Rabbi Michael Rothbaum, at <http://rabbicreditor.blogspot.com/2014/10/rabbi-michael-rothbaum-fergusonfargesn.html>.

This is not a new crisis. Our Jewish leaders have, in the past, taken note. Writing a telegram to President Kennedy, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel cried out⁹:

“{To President John F. Kennedy, the White House, June 16, 1963.}I look forward to the privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow at 4 p.m. ...likelihood exists that Negro problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Churches and synagogues have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month’s salary toward a fund for Negro housing and education. I propose that you Mr. President declare a state of moral emergency. A Marshall plan for aid to Negroes is becoming a necessity. The hour calls for high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.”

Still, it’s not easy to acknowledge even unconscious racism. We may feel defensive, even when evidence of our sins is put before us. Rabbi Fred Dobb observes, “We rationalize; shift topics; shift blame; invoke familiar alternative narratives; do mental gymnastics to avoid acknowledging what might undermine our esteemed self-concept.... we miss the mark on *teshuvah*...thus neither repent, nor improve.”¹⁰

⁹ <https://jwa.org/media/telegram-from-abraham-joshua-heschel-to-president-john-f-kennedy-june-16-1963>

¹⁰ Rabbi Fred Dobb, “Fragility” sermon, 2015

The promise of *teshuvah* is the opportunity to be in touch with our imperfections, to accept them, and then to turn the page to a new, and hopefully better chapter in our lives. Acknowledgement of sins of omission allows us to strive to be whole and truly good.

Another voice in the struggle to understand and accept the truth of racism comes from **Jay Smooth**¹¹ – a hip hop DJ and blogger. “Race,” Smooth says, “is like a dance partner designed to trip us up. Old racial ideas, which once ‘justified’ terrible behavior toward other human beings, pass down through society, and take root in our unconscious. That dance partner continues its evil footwork to this day.” Smooth urges us to move the conversation away from “am I racist” and to focus on “did I do something racist.”

Since it can be difficult to talk about racism, Smooth exhorts us that we need to “shift away from taking it as an indictment of our goodness, and move towards taking it as a gesture of respect and an act of kindness, when someone tells us that we’ve got something racist stuck in our teeth.”

Blogger *Courtney Martin* writes¹²,

“If you are white, if you’ve been socialized in the United States of America in the 21st century, you are racist...When white people dwell in shame, we tend to grow meek and fragile, try to play it safe or perform, get defensive, try to distance ourselves from the “bad white people,” and a

¹¹ http://www.salon.com/2015/03/19/jay_smooth_america_is_having_the_wrong_race_conversations_partner/

¹² Courtney Martin. “The Painful and Liberating Practice of Facing My Own Racism.” <https://onbeing.org/blog/courtney-martin-the-painful-and-liberating-practice-of-facing-my-own-racism>. See also: Do it Anyway. <https://www.amazon.com/Do-Anyway-New-Generation-Activists/dp/0807000477>.

whole host of other reactions that don't actually repair anything — relational or systemic.

Alternatively, when we move beyond shame (or at least don't let it be the driving emotion), we recognize that while we can never cure ourselves of the culture in which we were raised, we can transform it. It will take generations, but so be it. Now is the time to be on the right side of history, *not* by purifying yourself of racism, but by grappling with it one humbling, sad, liberating, loving moment at a time. It won't get you A's, but it will make you more human.”

Ta Nehisi Coates famously wrote in “The Atlantic” in 2014¹³, making the case for *reparations* for past African American slavery in America. Their labor built this country, and their suffering has yet to be reconciled or remediated.

I had the privilege to hear Coates speak in NYC when he published his book, *Between the World and Me*¹⁴ in 2015. Even better, I had a chance to meet him—he is indeed a visionary! This powerful book is written as a letter to his son, while addressing important questions about American history and ideals. Coates talks about how “Americans have built an empire on the idea of ‘race,’ a falsehood that damages us all but falls most heavily on the bodies of black women and men—bodies exploited through slavery and segregation, and, today, threatened, locked up, and murdered out of all proportion. What is it like to inhabit a black body and find a way to live within it? And how can we all honestly reckon with this fraught history and free ourselves from its burden?”

¹³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

¹⁴ <http://ta-nehisicoates.com/books/between-the-world-and-me/>

Between the World and Me is Ta-Nehisi Coates's attempt to answer these questions."

Coates argues that not only have we not reconciled our past, but also that our past is still present. For example, the history of exclusion of blacks from credit, based on federal policy, made them ripe for plunder for real estate speculators (sadly, many of whom were Jews.) This is one reason for persistent inequality and poverty that plagues the black community to this day.

My colleague Rabbi Bob Gluck wrote,

“Al het shekhatanu l'fanekha, for the sin that we sinned against You:

We have locked our car doors when driving in African American neighborhoods,

We have clutched our purses when black men enter an elevator,

We have treated black men with suspicion when they enter stores in which we work.

Al het shekhatanu l'fanekha, for the sin that we sinned against You:

We have turned our eyes when we meet young black men on the street,

We have crossed the street when we see black men approaching,

We have emulated black male entertainers, sports heroes, and musicians, but suspect their children...”

President Obama's July **2013** spoke after the Trayvon Martin decision, saying,

"There are very few African American men in this country who haven't

had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a

department store. That includes me. There are very few African American

men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and

hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me -- at least

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before I was a senator. There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often..."

This is the challenge of our *Ashamnu*. The misperceptions, cultural standards and institutions that perpetuate racism are not easy to dismantle. But as we acknowledge our own imperfections and find the courage to open doors to the tremendous possibility within our own souls, we can help to end racism.

These High Holy Days are an opportunity to begin again.
Ashamnu – we have sinned. And we pledge to change.

As Jay Smooth wisely observed, "We are not good despite our imperfections; it is the connection we maintain with our imperfections that allows us to be good."

May it be so.

Gemar Chatimah Tovah.