

Repairing the Bias in our Hearts

Rabbi Joshua Rabin (USCJ) wrote in 2018, “I will never forget the first time someone called me a racist. In the fourth grade, I got into a pushing match in the cafeteria with Umar, an African-American classmate, the cause of which I can no longer remember. The two of us were sent to the principal’s office, and when asked why he hit me, Umar said that I was a racist and called him a racial epithet. Shocked, I took offense at his accusation, and ultimately the principal sent us both on our way, pink slips in hand to be signed by each of our parents.”

This incident touches upon what Robin DiAngelo calls [white fragility](#), “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. ...upon the suggestion that a white person may possess an implicit form of racial bias, that white person engages ‘argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation,’ allowing his or her offense at the suggestion of racial bias to end the conversation, and thus ‘reinstate the racial equilibrium.’”¹

We need healing in our community and in our country. True healing cannot be achieved until we acknowledge the stain of racism and the pain and anguish and harm brought upon African Americans and other people of color in this country.

Rabbi Rabin asks, “... what is the spiritual obligation of Jews on this day, and what this day ought to become in the civil religion of American

¹ “Racial Justice Requires Repentance.” Rabbi Joshua Rabin. USCJ. January 2018

Jews? Like many rabbis, I grew up worshipping the iconic images of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching together in Selma, Alabama, reciting in numerous sermons Rabbi Heschel's famous quote that his 'feet were praying' as he marched with Dr. King. Few historical moments made me more proud to be a Jew and a rabbi."²

I too grew up during the civil rights movement, which left an indelible mark on my soul. Even as I embraced the value of equality and made a conscious choice to make every effort to be an anti-racist, my pursuit of racial justice has also been in reaction to, and rejection of, the racism I heard as a child from family members and some in the Jewish community. Nasty comments were made, and I felt shame for having been in any way associated with anyone, Jews especially, who espoused racist views. We could not call ourselves good people or lovers of justice until we courageously and consistently spoke the truth -- racist, hateful or disparaging comments are never acceptable. The stain of racist thoughts must be cleansed from our hearts and minds.

In fact, the Jewish community in this country has to reckon with our racist past. Some Southern Jews were slave owners and in the Jim Crow era, they were more segregationist and white supremacist than Northern Jews. Some remained quiet in the face of hateful prejudice and horrific treatment of African Americans in order to remain in the good graces of their white neighbors, but that does not absolve them, or the Jewish community, of the sins of racism.

² ibid

Rabbi Rabin rightly observes that “Many, if not most, Jews would bristle at any suggestion that we perpetuate a cycle of racial oppression in the United States. However, there is an essential difference between absolving ourselves of any responsibility for racism and acknowledging that all of us possess [implicit bias](#) that perpetuates racism, and a wise person ought to know the difference.”

What would it look like to truly acknowledge white privilege and implicit bias? Now, in this moment in time, we can, and we must “show up, flaws and all, and listen to the voices of people of color about where we fell short, and how we can walk in support of them.”

The Yamim Nora'im, and Yom Kippur in particular, ask us to engage in soul reckoning, *heshbon ha-nefesh*, when we take a moral inventory of ourselves. This year, pointedly, it requires that we notice how all of us “play a role in the racial climate we created, and all of us, in some way, are among the sinners.”³

In her powerful new book, ***Caste***, Isabel Wilkerson helps us to unpack the harsh power-dynamics of race through the prism of *caste*. For all the books I have read, and talks I have heard about racism in America, Wilkerson captures what I believe to be at the core of our country's historic and cultural problem. This past January-- which seems like a very long time ago -- I visited the museum of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and the lynching memorial established by the EJI. I could talk for hours about the gut-wrenching and utterly essential lessons we learned

³ *ibid*

there. But before we can go there, I want us to take deeper dive into the roots of racism so we can begin to find the path away from it.

According to Wilkerson,

“Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other. ... Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. *Caste* is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place.”

“Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial, subject to periodic redefinition to meet the needs of the dominant caste in what is now the United States....whoever fit the definition of white, at whatever point in history, was granted the legal rights and privileges of the dominant caste. Perhaps more critically and tragically, at the other end of the ladder, the subordinated caste, too, has been fixed from the beginning as the psychological floor beneath which other castes cannot fall.”

“As we go about our daily lives, *caste* is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of *caste* is not about feelings or morality. It is about power--which groups have it and which do not.”⁴

⁴ Isabel Wilkerson. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. Random House. 2020

Caste gets at the underlying infrastructure that we often cannot see, that is undergirding much of the inequality and injustices and disparities that we live with in this country. Wilkerson points out that it wasn't always this way. In the past, people who were Irish or Hungarian or Polish arriving in the U.S. would not have identified themselves as being white. Only in connection to the rankings that were created in the United States, where the designations of White and Black, and those in between, came to have meaning.

This *caste* system relegated those who were brought here to be enslaved to the very bottom *caste*, while elevating those who looked like those who had created the caste system -- that is, British or Western Europeans -- at the top of the *caste* system.

I recall stories and images of my grandparents upon their arrival to America, to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and I think of the poverty and prejudice and enormous struggles that awaited Jewish immigrants fleeing circumstances even worse back in Eastern Europe. The American community has not suffered the same atrocities and injustices that African Americans have over four hundred years. But we have surely suffered from our forced placement near the bottom of the ladder in the *caste* worldview. We know the indignities and terrors, along with the worries that have followed us up to this day as antisemitism has surfaced again.

Wilkerson links Nazi treatment of Jews to American treatment of blacks. "Both Nazi Germany and the United States reduced their out-groups, Jews and African Americans, respectively, to an undifferentiated mass of nameless, faceless scapegoats, the shock absorbers of the collective

fears and setbacks of each nation....The process of dehumanization before atrocities could be conducted speaks to the “interconnectedness not just of humanity but of evil within.”

In fact, Wilkerson exposes the Nazi connection to America’s Jim Crow laws. German eugenicists were in dialogue with American eugenicists. The Nazis actually sent investigators to study America's Jim Crow laws, researching how Americans had subjugated African Americans. They understood the correlation of these subordinated castes, and they even debated and consulted American law as they were devising the Nuremberg Laws. They couldn't understand why, from their perspective, the group that they had identified as the subordinated *caste* was not recognized in the United States in the same way.

Antisemites still seek to place Jews in the subordinated *caste*; we do share experiences of pain with our African American neighbors and friends. But their people’s placement in the bottom caste in this country continues to reverberate in many awful ways, and their suffering is uniquely theirs.

In *Caste*, Wilkerson tells many compelling stories. Here is one, a sample that demonstrates the breadth of the challenge. When Wilkerson was a national correspondent for the NYTimes, based in Chicago, she was reporting a piece about Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, the city’s upscale retail showcase. She arranged interviews with some “big name” New York based retailers establishing shop on Michigan Avenue. At the final interview, she arrived early and waited for the manager to arrive, standing in the empty boutique. Soon a man in a business suit and overcoat arrived, harried and breathless, looking at his watch. With a nod from the assistant manager

that this was the manager, she went up to him. His response to her attempt to introduce herself? “Oh, I can’t talk with you now. I’m very, very busy. I’m running late for an appointment.”

“I think I’m your appointment,” Wilkerson said.

He replied, “No, this is a very important appointment with the New York Times. I can’t talk with you now. I’ll have to talk with you some other time.”

Wilkerson replied, “But I am the New York Times. I talked with you on the phone. I’m the one who made the appointment with you for 4:30.”

Don’t you think that would have been enough? Not even close. He replied, “What’s the name?”

“Isabel Wilkerson with the New York Times.”

Impatiently, he shot back, “How do I know that? Look, I said I don’t have time to talk with you right now. She’ll be here any minute.” Again, he looked at the entrance and his watch.

“But I am Isabel. We should be having the interview right now,” she replied.

Then he asked her for identification -- did she have a business card? Wilkerson told him that she had been interviewing all day and had run out of cards.

His reply: “What about ID? Have you a license on you?” Wilkerson commented that she shouldn’t have to show it to him, but she did anyway.

Not good enough, apparently, he asked if she had anything with the NYTimes on it. “Why would I be here if I weren’t here to interview you? All this time has passed. We’ve been standing here, and no one else has shown up.”

The protest was to no avail. He said, “She must be running late. I’m going to have to ask you to leave so I can get ready for my appointment.”

Wilkerson left, “dazed and incensed.” She commented that “his caste notions of who should be doing what in society had so blinded him that he dismissed the idea that the reporter he was anxiously awaiting, excited to talk to, was standing right in front of him.” Wilkerson sadly observed that he simply couldn’t imagine that a NY Times reporter could “come in a container such as mine, despite every indication that I was she.”⁵

This is not just about race. It is about the way we perceive each other and order our world and find our place in it. What would it take for us to change that order and stand in a different place? Wilkerson reflects that “There are people of personal courage and conviction, secure within themselves, willing to break convention, not reliant on the approval of others for their sense of self, people of deep and abiding empathy and compassion. They are what many of us might wish to be but not nearly enough of us are. Perhaps, once awakened, more of us will be.”⁶

It is time for our awakening, as individuals and as a Jewish people in alliance with others. Wilkerson reminds us that “Americans pay a steep price for a caste system that runs counter to the country’s stated ideals.”

⁵ Isabel Wilkerson. *Caste, The Origins of Our Discontents*. Random House. 2020 (pages 59-61)

⁶ *Ibid.* page 384

She recommends that we undertake a public accounting of what caste has cost us, a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” to come to terms with our country’s past. We can only solve the problem of caste and race hostility by admitting the problem and understanding it.

The challenge for our time, Wilkerson advises, is to see through the many layers of a caste system that has too much power over our society and our lives. The wrenching social divisions that we are experiencing now center around the changing face of America, increasingly and soon exceedingly non-white. We are witnessing what can happen when the dominant class realizes that their social caste may not last. “A caste system spares no one,” Wilkerson observes.

What we need is “radical empathy.” Not just the empathy of standing in the other’s shoes. No, it is more than that. It is *v’ahavta le’re’acha kamocha*, love your neighbor as yourself. Radical empathy takes time and work, educating ourselves and listening with a humble heart to understand another’s experience from their perspective, and not as we imagine we would feel. In a commanding voice, Wilkerson says that “the price of privilege is the moral duty to act when one sees another person treated unfairly.” Radical empathy is a reaching forward for true connection that once multiplied across humanity will transform our lives and our world.

Our recent Stopping Stones event which placed markers in a downtown Burlington location where there were two enslaved individuals at the home of Ethan Allen’s daughter, opened doors of understanding, compassion and friendship. May we continue to walk the path of truth and empathy with open hearts and pursuit of equality and compassion for

others. As the prophet Isaiah commands on this Yom Kippur day, that is the purpose of our fast.

May you be inscribed and sealed in the book of life for good.

Gemar chatimah tovah.