

Kol Nidrei 5781
Re-Creation
Rabbi Betsy Forester

At this season, we celebrate the Creation of the World and contemplate our response to the great gift of being alive. Like all things, what it means to be alive in this world takes on a different resonance and a particular urgency each year.

You know the verse in Genesis, “There was evening, and there was morning, a first day.” We surmise that this biblical evening was the very first evening, *ever*--at least in the religious imagination. But what if it were *not* the first? What if there were other worlds before ours? Our sages shockingly suggest that God created many worlds, and destroyed them in succession, a series of dissatisfactions, each new world erected on the ruins of the former (*B'reishit Rabbah* 3:7).

How might we live differently today, if we were to allow ourselves to imagine that we stand on layers of discarded rubble, ideas and notions that did not hold? It's not such a stretch, actually, because we do. And that's healthy. In order to grow and to flourish, the spiritual or religious person always seeks lessons and moral wisdom in the rubble of what came before.

We are learning a lot from the brokenness of our world and our country right now. Much of what we are learning will take years to crystalize, but on at least one subject, the cracks in the foundation of our *country* lie exposed at our feet--and that subject is the systemic racism woven into the fabric of America. On this Yom Kippur, our country's original sin--slavery, and the continued oppression of people of color, and Black people especially, in every area and at all levels of society--weighs heavily upon us.

The rabbinic notion about the series of created worlds speaks to me at this time, demanding that we examine the very foundations of our country, with hope and belief that with God's help we can do something serious to dismantle the racism that was baked in from the start and continues to affect all of us.

This is a day for collective atonement. We have sinned, we have transgressed, we have abused, betrayed, and embittered, knowingly and unknowingly. We seek forgiveness and help on this day, and we commit to doing better.

I invite us to imagine an America where it is not dangerous to be Black. I don't say this to be inflammatory. Black American men, women, and children have been killed with impunity in this country [by the institutional descendants of slave patrols] for nothing--walking home from the store with candy, sleeping in their own beds, jogging, walking, driving. For being Black. Our own eyes have seen this now.

When we really imagine a world where it is not only safe to be Black, but where people of color have the same chance to succeed as white people, we begin to see the magnitude of what needs to change, including our place of privilege as a group of people who are mostly white. We who are not Black are beginning to see ourselves as responsible like never before. It is profoundly humbling. Discovering that we have a tremendous amount to learn and unlearn, and to uncover nearly unbearable truths, is disconcerting and painful for many of us. It is time to lean into what we are being called to do at this time. Our sacred task as human beings created in God's image is to stand in the space between what is difficult and what is impossible, and expand our moral horizons. And, as daunting as it will feel, we will find the strength we need.

We have a curious case in our Bible (*Parashat Shoftim*) that feels like it was written for us at this moment. It goes like this: A person is found dead, presumably murdered, in an unincorporated area. Murder defiles the land, so it must be expiated. The elders of the nearest town, therefore, must perform a ritual in which they kill a cow that has never been worked in a wadi whose soil has never been tilled or sown.

The elders must wash their hands over this animal and declare that they had no part in the murder that took place. Consider this for a moment. Here we have the waste of an animal and its potential service and the symbolic gesture of innocent hands, when obviously someone is guilty. It no longer really matters who killed the victim. What matters is that a vulnerable person passed through a town unseen and unhelped, the forces of evil in that town went unchecked, and now there must be a reckoning.

This is what seeing George Floyd's murder showed us about what happens in our country. And let us not kid ourselves into thinking it hasn't been happening all along. From policies to postcards, the evidence is stark and unambiguous.

This Yom Kippur, shuls across this country are finally addressing our nation's original sin and its baked-in effects. It is uncomfortable, and I suspect that most of us would rather not talk about it. Nobody really wants to bring this huge problem to good people who are already suffering through a pandemic. But not to do so would be tantamount to ignoring the entire purpose of this day.

Many of us have seen the videos of unarmed, unresisting Black people being shot or suffocated, and white people getting away with murder because they are white. What our eyes have seen has seared in our hearts what our biblical, prophetic, and rabbinic tradition emphatically rail against over and over, unambiguously--marginalizing vulnerable people, allowing for a permanent underclass, prejudicial and biased law enforcement, courts that show deference to the privileged, and standing idly by the blood of our neighbors. If our texts and traditions fail to incline us toward justice, our moral intuition should.

For the sin of being complicit in assaults against humanity, may God forgive us and pardon us, for we have turned our backs on God's image, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

Each of us has their own narratives to unpack. I'd like to let you in on a tiny slice of mine. I was raised to be proud of being a third-generation American. I was aware that it was unusual for a Jew my age to have all four grandparents born in this country. The key to their successful matriculation, I now understand, was not character, or drive, or intelligence, all of which they had in abundance. It was whiteness. I am still learning how much my own feelings of security and empowerment in this country as a third generation American stem from the privilege of being white.

When Black slaves were emancipated, they were left to fend for themselves, while millions of acres of land were parceled out to white people under the Homestead Act. From 1868 to 1934, our government gave away 246 million acres in 160-acre tracts, nearly 10 percent of this country's land, to more than 1.5 million white families, native-born and foreign. My ancestors who came from Scandinavia were among those foreign immigrants. They settled here, in southern Wisconsin. I could refuse to see how that has anything to do with me, four generations later. But I am a Jew, whose everyday actions are informed by 4,000 years of history. How, then, can I possibly give myself permission to turn my back on where my privilege comes from, at the expense of others?

I know, none of *us* built this country on a foundation of slavery or a permanent underclass. If you're like me, you were not taught about this. If you're like me, you were taught to treat all people equally, and you've had some close friends, maybe even relatives, who are Black. If you're like me, you thought you were colorblind, and you thought that was a good thing.

One of the most painful truths I have learned is that those self-serving narratives, while reflecting good values, do not change the systemic problem of racism. Being nice people simply will not do--not because we created this problem, but because if we do not actively combat it, we perpetuate it. The proverbial adage that any smart, hard-working, achievement-oriented person can "raise themselves up by their bootstraps" is not only deeply offensive but empirically wrong. None of my immigrant great-grandparents could do it, because they were poor and didn't fit in. Their children, my grandparents, who were smart and hard-working were able to raise themselves up because they enjoyed the privilege of whiteness.

Being Jewish, with our own history of oppression and very real concerns about anti-semitism does not let us off the hook here. The fact that a movement as large and diverse as Black Lives Matter includes some individuals with anti-Israel or even anti-semitic views does not allow us to shirk our responsibility to combat racism. The current groundswell of activism to dismantle racism is about ending it in this country, and it's about time for large groups of Jews to step up, as Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel and a handful of other prominent Jews modeled for us in the 60's.

The thriving of humanity depends upon our willingness to engage with narratives and perspectives that make us profoundly uncomfortable. Recently, our member David Hoffert posted on FaceBook: "Feeling horrified is necessary, but also not enough. Getting out and protesting is necessary, but also not enough. Demanding change from our political leaders is necessary, but also not enough. Looking in the mirror, and demanding change of ourselves, is *also* necessary. It's time for all of us, myself included, to step up." Many of you have told me that you feel the same way.

In June, our Board of Directors produced a clear and bold statement of commitment "to educate ourselves and each other" and "to work first to define, and then to pursue, a long-term racial justice project to engage Beth Israel Center members." Our Social Justice committee identified a path forward, and just last week, our Board unanimously approved what will be a major initiative our *kahal* will undertake to combat racism.

We are fortunate to have as part of its Madison community The Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development, a black-led organization that has become a national and international leader working with white would-be allies to address systemic racism. Their founder, the Reverend Alex Gee, is a friend of mine, a friend whom I hoped to form a meaningful relationship with from the time we met two summers ago, and he told me about himself and his work. Many of our members have taken Nehemiah's course, *Justified Anger: Black History for a New Day* and have been looking forward to next

steps. Nehemiah's talented staff has worked with educational and community organizations for many years. They will guide and mentor us through a deep process of discovery, education, taking responsibility, and action. We will begin with a year of deep and probing study, engaging with difficult topics like racial disparities, bias, and cultural assimilation. When we are ready, out of deep learning, will come plans for action. I am thrilled that we will be the first religious organization to work with Nehemiah, which is also a faith-based organization that shares many of our values. Reverend Gee and I talk together as pastors and friends. Our relationship makes us especially excited and hopeful about working together in a trusting and committed partnership. I am so grateful to Andrea Dearlove, our member who worked hard to help us develop our initiative, and to Sally Jones and Judy Pierotti for guiding us to this opportunity.

After the holidays, you will begin to hear about opportunities to get involved in making history through sustained engagement and strategic work. I hope that many members of our Beth Israel Center family will take part in this initiative. I look forward to growing together and making history with you.

However each of us does it, I hope and pray that we will answer the call of this moment. I believe we can imagine a better world. Let us not look back and say we missed the moment to be on the right side of history. Let us finally agree that it is time to raise up the divinity in all people and commit to wiping away the stain of racism in our country.

As Jews, we are bound in sacred commitment to co-create the more perfect world our hearts know is possible. Our sacred task is to make this world a place where God's presence delights to dwell. It is time to embark on re-creation.

I cannot think of a more important way to honor the great gift of being alive in this world than to work for the full flourishing of humanity. And that is precisely what we are here to do. I pray for the courage and humility to serve God with all of our hearts, our souls, and our might.

