

Yom Kippur Sermon
Teshuva as Relational Work and Doing Teshuva for Failures of Racial Justice
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I want to start with a story. As some of you know, I didn't get my driver's license until last year. While I was borrowing a friend's care last I was stopped at a red light when two kids one probably around eight, the other probably around ten started to cross in front of me. The younger one stopped. He put his hand out and mouthed at me to roll down my window and shake his hand. I chose not to.

It is easy for me to make excuses about nerves and anxiety around driving, but the reality is my internalized racism reared its ugly head.

Something inside of me saw an eight-year-old black boy as a threat. The piece of me who has been told by family members that majority black neighborhoods are not safe. This piece of me that sees media justifying police murder of black people by saying, "He looked like an animal." The piece of me, who still at times clutches his valuables a little bit tighter when a person of color walks by, took over.

This part of me said, "You don't know what this kid is going to do." Worse, I contributed to a society that tells eight-year-old black boys, "Your difference scares me."

Yes, I went to Charlottesville to face off against white supremacy. Yes, I consider myself as someone who is doing his best to fight for racial justice and I still have internalized racism that I need to do real teshuva around.

How do I do this work? Where do I turn?

One source, is the laws of teshuva found in Rambam's Mishneh Torah. One of the recurring themes is how relational this work is.

"It is very praiseworthy for a person who repents to confess in public and to make their sins known to others."¹

"Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between man and God...However, sins between people...will never be forgiven until one gives one's colleague what one owes them and appeases them"

¹ Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilkhhot Teshuva 2:5

“It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, one should be easily pacified, but hard to anger. When the person who wronged them asks for forgiveness, one should forgive them with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if they aggravated and wronged them severely, one should not seek revenge or bear a grudge”²

In short, in order to do true teshuva, repentance, one needs to verbalize what they did wrong. They are praised if they do this in front of their community. They need to seek forgiveness from those they wronged even if financial restitution is made and one should not withhold forgiveness. No one would be able to do the work of teshuva as Rambam outlines it without being in relationship with the person they hurt.

In thinking about doing teshuva around racial justice specifically, I was reminded of a story I shared with last year’s Bat Mitzvah students about Miriam from the Bbook of Numbers.

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: “He married a Cushite woman!”³

When I asked all of our students, “So what does this sound like” one of them exclaimed, “Racism.”

The story continues that Miriam gets a skin affliction from G!d and is banished from the camp for seven days.

If we agree with our Bat Mitzvah student here we have a story of G!d punishing one of our biblical heroines for her racism.

Rabbis in our tradition respond to the perception that this might be an instance of racism in a Midrash.

They say that Miriam’s statements could not be about his Cushite wife, because, “Cushite in Gematria means ‘good looking’⁴

² Ibid 2:10

³ Bemidbar/Numbers 12:10

⁴ Midrash Tanhuma Tzav 13

Gematria is a system where each Hebrew letter is given a numerical value. This midrash adds up the values of the letters in the word Cushite and says that number is the same as the Hebrew phrase “good looking” or “beautiful in appearance.”⁵

Whether or not the bible intended it, there is perceived racism in this story, but anyone who learns this Midrash is told diversity is actually beautiful. This can be seen as the rabbis in this Midrash, after a long period of time, doing teshuva for the racism in this biblical story. They may have had more exposure to decedents of Cushites. Society may have changed enough for them to recognize this racism. We cannot know, but they could have picked any number of phrases with the same numerical value as Cushite. They chose beautiful in appearance, making the point diversity is beautiful.

I want to move us into the modern era and highlight some examples of teshuva between Jewish and black leadership.

Today. Right now. In Washington D.C. there is a March for Racial Justice. The original proposed date was not available and today was picked,

“...because it is the anniversary of the Elaine Massacre of 1919 in Elaine, Arkansas, during which more than 200 Black men and women were killed in cold blood by a mob of white citizens and law enforcement. Many of the Black victims had recently returned from World War I where they fought for our country. They died standing up for their rights and the rights of their communities. They were murdered in what was the largest state-sanctioned massacre of black people in US history.”⁶

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, the head of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights is in a coalition with the organizers of this march. When she saw the date she immediately reached out because it was Yom Kippur. She wanted to see if Jewish and Black organizers committed to racial justice work could come up with a creative solution to allow Jewish participation.

It would have been so easy for Jill to feel defeated in that moment and write off this coalition. She could have said, “They slighted the Jewish community. Why should I bother? I’ll find others to work with.”

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ciannavi, Andrea “Statement Regarding Yom Kippur” August 16, 2017
<https://www.m4rj.com/updates/2017/8/16/yom-kippur-statement>

Instead she stayed in the conversation. She worked with leaders in her coalition to see what creative solutions could be reached to allow Jewish participation. Through conversation, reflection, and strategic thinking the organizers proposed an agreed upon solution along with a statement apologizing for their painful oversight. They made teshuva.

There are many examples of how we as Jews have failed the black community. These include:

- Jews of Color feel awkward or unwelcome in synagogue.⁷
- Jews attempting to figure out if Jews of Color are “really” Jewish through asking invasive questions.⁸
- Jews asking invasive questions regardless of intent.
- Jews of color harassed by police because Jewish events are held in areas they are seen as a threat.⁹
- Jews assuming Jews of Color are non-Jews in various environments including Jewish summer camps.¹⁰
- Sometimes Jews have even called police on Jews of color and had them removed from synagogue because the Jewish community did not know who they were and got scared by their presence.¹¹

There are Jews who are reluctant to believe these stories, which is its own form of racism.

There are examples of Jews who feel erased by event descriptions for Marches for Racial Justice not including fighting against Anti-Semitism. They feel erased by not being included in movies about the Civil Rights movement. They feel erased by language used in blog posts and articles not including them.

⁷ Davis, Erika, “Talking Honestly About Jews and Racism” June 13, 2012

<http://forward.com/sisterhood/157719/talking-honestly-about-jews-and-racism/>

⁸ Shervington, Chava, “Op-Ed: For Black Orthodox Jews, constant racism is exhausting” July 16, 2015

<https://www.jta.org/2015/07/16/news-opinion/united-states/op-ed-its-time-to-confront-racism-in-orthodox-jewish-community>

⁹ Schaefer, Brian, “Black Lives in the Jewish Community: We Matter Too” December 30, 2015

<https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/.premium-1.694393>

¹⁰ Rishon, Shoshana Neorah “Rules for Incorporating Diversity and Understanding at Jewish Sleepaway Camp

August 4, 2015 <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/192665/rules-for-incorporating-diversity-and-understanding-at-jewish-sleepaway-camp>

¹¹ MaNishtanah “High Holiday Safety for Jews of Color in NYC” Tablet Magazine September 11, 2015

<http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/193507/high-holiday-safety-for-jews-of-color-in-nyc>

From a place of hurt and pain because of this erasure they then shut out Jews of Color and other African American perspectives, Jewish or not. Out of pain, hurt, perceived anti-Semitism Jews say, “We cannot work with you. We cannot invite you in. You have hurt us.”

This may not be happening here. This may not be happening in the majority of synagogues, but as I mentioned when I spoke about the Al Chet and Ashamnu, we as individuals and communities take responsibility for our community members and communities. We have real teshuva to do.

So what does it take for us, for me, to do teshuva?

First, we need to recognize it internally then verbalize it, ideally in community.

I am naming it now:

My internalized racism caused me to not shake an eight-year-old black boy's hand.

We need to seek forgiveness from those we hurt as the organizers for the March for Racial Justice did:

The organizers of the March for Racial Justice did not realize that September 30 was Yom Kippur when we were factoring in these and other considerations and applying for permits.

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.

While not a direct quote, this could be a way for the Jewish community to seek forgiveness:

We as a Jewish community, recognize the pain of Black Jews. We recognize there have been times our refusal to work with and welcome the Black community has caused deep hurt and pain. We are deeply sorry for this pain and hurt. We recognize the ways we need to work harder at creating a more welcoming, inviting, open space and dialogue. We are committed to doing this work.

We need to be have a complete heart and willing spirit, refusing to bear a grudge as we forgive. These are my own words:

When words in a platform/event description make us feel invisible or hurt. When we feel slighted by those doing racial just work we need to enter into conversations. Trust in our relationships to have the hard conversations about that pain so that those who pained us are given the opportunity to forgive. So that we do not close doors on relationships due to pain the other party might be completely unaware of.

I want to bless us first by acknowledging this work can feel messy at times, but ultimately it is about building relationships. All of us here are experts in building and sustaining relationships. All of us in this room are in relationship with another person where we have had difficult conversations, where we have sought forgiveness and where we have forgiven.

So on this Yom Kippur, as we think about our individual and collective actions let us commit to the hard work of analyzing our internal biases, asking how we have missed the mark in standing up for racial justice, who do we need forgiveness from and who or what do we need to forgive to recommit to this work. As we do this work, let us remember our expertise in relationship-building. Let us remember although it feels hard and messy at times, this work is one way to move the world from how it is to the world we envision on Shabbat, of peace, justice, and wholeness. The world that we dream for. Shabbat Shalom and G'mar chatimah tovah.