

Yom Kippur Morning 5781/2020- We are God's Witness

Rabbi Mara Nathan

MLK weekend 2020 seems like a lifetime ago. In January we came together with the members of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, just like we have done for the last five years. Pastor Kemp preached here, I preached at Antioch and the choirs sang together. It was a great weekend. It always is but, it always leaves me wanting more. So, I issued a challenge to both congregations to study together, to do acts of social action together and to break bread together.

In the March bulletin I invited you to host members of Antioch at your Passover Seders. But COVID-19 had other plans for us this year. So, we put aside *our* plans to enhance our relationship until George Floyd died while in Police custody on May 25th.

I texted Pastor Kemp: "I want you to know that our community stands with your community because we are one community. My heart is heavy and I am truly ashamed. I want my people to know that we *are* going to speak out about racism. I want your community to know that we want to be good allies and friends and we may need some guidance on how to do that effectively."

Looking back, I recognize that I did this for myself, not for him. And he was gracious and kind in his response.

But, I have heard him say, "apologies are just platitudes." It's not enough to say the right things. We have to do the work necessary to effect the changes that are so long overdue.

So here we are. We are going to have a candid, awkward, maybe painful conversation about racism.

As Jews it is our obligation not only to call out injustice in our midst but to actively engage in dismantling it too. The founders of our congregation saw this, so they inscribed the words of the prophet Isaiah on one of our Sanctuary's stained glass

windows: “You are my witnesses, said the Lord, and my servants whom I have chosen.”¹

Something happened in this country after George Floyd was killed, that was unexpected.

Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013 with a mostly left of center appeal. Yet now it’s decentralized reach is said to be larger than the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

This time, vigils and interfaith panels proliferated to spotlight issues of economic, educational and institutional racism. This time, books like *How to be an Anti-racist*, *White Fragility*, and *Rising out of Hatred* instantly sold out, because, white people suddenly felt compelled to educate themselves.

This time, instead of white people sighing, saying “Yes, racism is terrible...” shaking our heads and moving on we seemed to suddenly awaken to what Black people, indigenous people and all people of color have known all along. This country was built on the backs of black and brown people, and our country is rife with racism to this day.

But what I’m wondering is, will this time really be different? Yes, we are seeing in-depth discussions about inequitable housing and inequitable education and inequitable economic opportunities. There are calls for Police Reform and Federal reparations for slavery. Companies are moving towards in depth bias training for every employee.

But if those of us who are white could hit a button and instantly remove the privileges afforded to us would we hit that button?²

Today, we are asked to look deep down into our souls and set our moral, ethical and spiritual accounts in order. Our ultimate goal is *Teshuvah*, a return to a better version of ourselves.

Martin Buber says: “*Teshuvah* is the act of decision in its ultimate intensification; It denotes the decisive turning point in a person’s life, a renewing, **total reversal**

¹ Isaiah 113:10

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/29/white-people-ally-black-people-sacrifice>

in the midst of the normal course of someone's existence. When in the midst of 'sin,' what he calls **decisionlessness**, suddenly, the will to decision awakens and the cover of routine life bursts open, and primal forces break through, storming heavenward. In the person who returns, creation begins anew; in their renewal the substance of the world is made new again."

Will we commit the sin of **decisionlessness** for yet another year? Or will we find the courage to commit to a **total reversal** in the normal course of our existence?

The ADL defines racism as "the marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people..."³ There is no one person, or community or political party to blame.

Our history, our laws and our institutions have advantaged white people and disadvantaged people of color since the original colonists came to these shores.⁴ And these inequalities, are so baked into our societal norms that white people are generally oblivious to our own contributions to systematic racism, to the microaggressions our black and brown friends encounter every day.

We say we are raising our children to be color blind as if that is the answer, when all we are doing is whitewashing the notion of our own privilege and refusing to acknowledge how different life with black or brown skin can be.⁵

In her 2011 academic paper, *White Fragility*. Robin Di Angelo wrote: As white people we are taught that our perspective and experiences in the world are a universal reference point for everyone. White people are "just people" and represent all of humanity. People of color, however, are never "just people" but always, most particularly, Black people, Asian people, [Latinx people] etc.. they can only represent their own racialized experiences."⁶

³ <https://www.adl.org/racism>

⁴ <https://www.adl.org/racism>

⁵ Di Angelo, Robin, *White Fragility*, International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 2011, p 58

⁶ *Ibid*, p 59

For those of us who are white Jews confronting racial bigotry and discrimination can feel complicated. We are empathetic, since discrimination is also part of our experience. (White Nationalist groups spew hate about black people AND Jews (among other minorities)).

But we balk when we are labeled with white-privilege, and are defensive when BDS activists create links of “intersectional solidarity” between the protests against anti-Black racism in America and BDS organizations’ demands to dismantle the State of Israel.”⁷

So, some of us avoid the conversation. We would rather not own our own participation in the systems that ruin so many lives.

Some feel better responding to specific instances of individual tragedy.

They think that it is enough to ‘say their names’:

Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor and so many others....

It is not enough.

We cannot deny that systemic racism in America is real. We cannot ignore the anger, frustration and fear black and brown people experience on any given day.

Yes, there are people of color who are anti-Zionist and/or anti-Semitic. There are no perfect allies in this world...because there are no perfect people. So we don’t get a pass to sit this one out.

“You are my witnesses, said the Lord, and my servants whom I have chosen.”⁸

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In June, a video was circulated on Twitter and Instagram showing three white, female Alamo Heights High School students laughing while one girl uses a racial slur. The posts garnered hundreds of likes and retweets.⁹

⁷ <https://jcpa.org/the-alignment-of-bds-and-black-lives-matter-implications-for-israel-and-diaspora-jewry/>

⁸ Isaiah 113:10

⁹ <https://sanantonioreport.org/video-of-alamo-heights-students-using-n-word-prompts-examination-of-racism-in-small-affluent-school-district/>

The posts also started a conversation on social media about racism in our community.

A group of Alamo Heights Alumni some of whom are Temple members gathered quarantine-style on Zoom to write a petition for stronger policies that penalize hate speech both on and off campus. Several Instagram accounts were created including “Change Heights” and ‘Blacks at Saint Mary’s Hall”, “to offer a safe space for members of marginalized communities to share their experiences of discrimination within the school community.”

The sharing was instantaneous....and quite frankly nauseating to read and there were far too many stories to write any of one of them off as ‘marginal’.

One alum wrote: “My sophomore year a guy told me openly in front of the entire health class, teacher included, “Black is beautiful, Tan is grand, but White is the color of The Big Boss Man. You gotta know your place.” The teacher didn’t bat an eye and that was that. Someone else chimed in with “at least he said black is beautiful.”

This is not about a bunch of inappropriate white teenage girls and boys. And this is not just an Alamo Heights problem, or a Texas problem. This is an American problem. And we have a responsibility to own it, learn about it and dismantle it.

For too long, we have allowed ourselves to be manipulated into seeing specific people as the real problem. But the time has come to reckon with the systems and policies that have perpetuated this racist reality.¹⁰

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We’ve got a long way to go to achieve true *teshuvah*....to arrive at what Martin Buber called “*a total reversal in the normal course of our existence.*” So if we don’t start now....we’ll never get there. How do we begin?

¹⁰ Kendi, Ibram X., *How to be an antiracist*, 28

First, we need to acknowledge that to say “I am not racist,” or “I don’t have a problem with black people,” or “all lives matter,” is completely missing the point. Its equivalent to someone saying, “some of my best friends are Jews,” and then spending the day at their exclusive country club Known for its unspoken ‘most Jews not admitted policy’.

This is why, Anti-racist scholar, Ibram X Kendi insists, that we need to redefine our terms and our mindset. He writes: “The opposite of racist isn’t “not racist” it is anti-racist. What's the difference? One either endorses the idea of racial hierarchy, and is a racist, or acknowledges racial inequality and is an anti-racist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, and is a racist or locates the roots of problems in power and policies and is an anti-racist. There *is no* in-between safe space of ‘non-racist.’ The claim of ‘not racist’ neutrality is a mask for racism.¹¹

Second, we must commit ourselves to the work. Critically observe our own words and behavior. Recognize our own microaggressions and pledge to stop. As Reverend Dr. Claudette Copeland counsels, it is possible to listen into awareness, but you must do your own work.

We must invest our time and money into building more equitable systems and support organizations like Black Outside, Inc.¹², NAACP San Antonio¹³, San Antonio Area African American Community Fund¹⁴, 100 Black Men of San Antonio¹⁵ and other organizations¹⁶ that create education and job training opportunities for people of color.

We must go out of our way to spend money at businesses owned by black people. Book stores, restaurants, clothing boutiques...the dentist! And if you are an employer, hire people who don’t look like you.

Third, we need to call out racism when we see it. Last year on Rosh Hashanah,

¹¹ Kendi, Ibram X, How to be an Anti-Racist, p 9

¹² blackoutside.org

¹³ sanantoniaaaccp.org

¹⁴ saafdn.org

¹⁵ 100blackmenofsanantonio.org

¹⁶ <https://www.sanantoniomag.com/local-organizations-to-support-to-further-racial-equality/>

I challenged us to confront anti-Semitic misconceptions, stereotypes and hurtful language. If we truly are God's witnesses, as the prophet Isaiah claims, then we must also call out racial slurs, bullying, stereotyping and discrimination when we see them.

And finally, we must accept that this work will take time, and that to admit racism taints our culture and society is not a sin. But to deny that it is so, most certainly is.¹⁷

At this moment of national reckoning, every single one of us has *teshuvah* to make. And it will take endurance to persist. So as we begin this Jewish new year Let us be God's witnesses: strong enough to stand in discomfort and listen, honest enough to acknowledge the discrimination around us and brave enough to overcome our fear of change.

AMEN

¹⁷ Glennon Doyle