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Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York
Yom Kippur Evening 5781

“A Stone of Understanding”

In my study hangs a photograph of Jackie Robinson taken not long before his death. His hair is white. He leans forward, his left elbow on a table, his chin in his hand. He gazes ahead, but seems to be thinking back, a weariness in his eyes. I examine the portrait often. What is he recalling?, I wonder. Stealing home against the Yankees in the 1955 World Series? The abuse his rookie year? His later political activism? The loss of his son? I try to imagine, but I’ll never know. Even were the picture frame a window with Jackie Robinson sitting right outside, I couldn’t know. None of us can ever truly know what occupies another’s thoughts. Despite our common humanity, we are inherently separate beings.

The rabbis acknowledged this paradox – that we can be so similar, yet so distinct.

Certainly we are more alike than not. The Torah opens with the story of creation to teach us that we are a single family, descendants of the same first person. God fashioned Adam with bits of clay of varying shade from all over the earth so that no one could ever say, “my color is superior to yours” or “my ethnicity is greater than yours.”

Yet the rabbis never denied our differences. They observed that when human beings mint coins, we cast them from a single mold and all the coins look alike. When God creates people, God does so in the image of Adam, but each of us is unique.

Our individuality underlies our humanity. It makes us who we are. But it does also separate us from one another. We can never really know what it means to be someone else...or part of someone else’s community.

Author Lawrence Otis Graham explained: “Try as I may to see things from the perspective of a white person, I can see them only from [my] experience...as a black man....We [may] observe each other and think...we have a close understanding of what it means to be black, white, Hispanic, Asian, male, female, rich, or poor, [but] we really don’t – and very often we find ourselves gazing at each other through the wrong end of the telescope...the relevant subtleties linger[ing] just outside our view, eluding us.”

Graham’s words, written six years ago after the shooting death of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri echo loudly, both in the communal divides we have yet to bridge, and in the personal rifts we have yet to heal. Relationships, societal and individual, are frustrated by our inherent separateness.

“Can You Hear Me?”

Martin Luther King understood this: “I am convinced,” he said, “that men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don’t know each other, and they don’t know each other because they don’t communicate with each other, and they don’t communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.”

This is not a sermon about racism; it is a sermon informed by racism – a sermon about understanding; about hearing and seeing. The same narrowness of vision that abets racism on a broad scale, also inhibits our most intimate relationships.

Racism remains so engrained in our social structures we who do not experience it may not recognize it until highly publicized tragedies throw it into painful relief.

The coronavirus certainly laid it bare. While the agony and loss in every community have been horrific, how can we not acknowledge that African Americans have suffered disproportionately in both mortality rates and economic impact, or pretend to be surprised, when we consider the enduring gap in housing, healthcare, education access, and the nature of jobs often held.

And then came the murder of Ahmaud Arbery; next the police killing of Breonna Taylor, for which there remains no accountability; then of Daniel Prude, Steven Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks and Julian Lewis, each death proof of the chasm separating blacks and whites in law enforcement – a pandemic we knew too well from so many other deaths like Eric Garner’s on Staten Island, whose last words also were “I can’t breathe.”

Make no mistake. We would never impugn all police, and decry any incitement to violence against them. The recent ambush shooting of two Los Angeles sheriff’s deputies reminds us of the dangers inherent in putting on a uniform, which most officers selflessly accept out of genuine devotion to the wellbeing of their communities. We must recognize their sacrifice.

And “we must [also] see the trauma, fear and exhaustion of being Black in our...country” – Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers’s words after an officer shot Jacob Blake seven times in the back before his children’s eyes, while two nights later, as the paralyzed man lay shackled to his hospital bed, a white vigilante with an AR-15-style rifle over his shoulder and the blood of three on his hands roamed free. Only when we hear in the gasp “I can’t breathe” the suffocation of twenty generations of African Americans will we begin to grasp their pain. Only once we admit that white America’s knee has pinned Black America’s neck to the ground since before America’s founding can we start to uproot the racism embedded in our nation’s institutions.

But to get to that point – to be able to see the racism and hear the anguish – we must first acknowledge our divergent experiences of America, or what W.E.B. Du Bois called the “double-consciousness” of being Black. In an 1897 essay for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Du Bois captured white America’s bewilderment at knowing how even to begin. “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question,” he explained, “unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it...How does it feel to be a problem?”¹

Last spring Reverend Steven Jones, Temple Emanu-El’s wonderful vice president of finance, and also minister of worship and liturgy at Bronx’s Goodwill Baptist Church, preached a stirring sermon on being Black in America. “Can you hear me?,” he asked us. “It is natural to wish for life to just get back to normal as a pandemic...depends everything around us, “ he appreciated. “But we have to remember that for millions of Americans, being treated differently on account of race is...normal.”

“Can you hear me?” For many of us, the beneficiaries of white privilege, the distress of our African American friends, coworkers, even family members came as a startling revelation: their wariness if not outright fear of police given just how many have been accosted by officers at gunpoint; their dread their teenagers will be shot or their fathers found dead in a ditch by the

¹ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1897.

side of the road; “the talk” Black parents must have with their children about how to behave in public not to arouse suspicion; the daily verbal and non-verbal insults Blacks endure in ways that don’t register for us as they are assumed to be salespeople not customers in stores and are passed over for promotion; the anger and frustration so long suppressed. As James Baldwin explained in 1961, “To be a Negro in this country...is to be in a state of rage...almost all of the time...It isn’t only what is happening to you....It’s what’s happening all around you...in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference...and ignorance.”

We are no longer ignorant, so let us not be indifferent. No more moral blindness. Let this centuries-overdue awakening to the enduring presence and effects of systemic racism spur us toward sustained efforts at police reform, criminal justice reform, education reform, housing reform, healthcare reform...voting reform. Let us be inspired by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s searing dissent in *Shelby County v. Holder*, a ruling, in her words, “striking at the heart of the Nation’s signal piece of civil-rights legislation,” the Voting Rights Act of 1965. “For a half century,” she wrote, “a concerted effort has been made to end racial discrimination in voting,” and “progress once the subject of a dream...continues to be made....But there ha[s] to be a steadfast national commitment to see the task through to completion.”² And finally, as Ta-Nehisi Coates admonished in his letter-memoir to his son, *Between the World and Me*, let us recognize that “the talk of diversity, sensitivity training, and body cameras...[while] all fine and applicable...allow the citizens of this country to pretend that there is a real distance between their own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect them.”³ Who we appoint to protect us, who we accept to judge us, who we elect to lead us reflect who we are.

Tzarut Ayin

Racism in America is a sermon all its own. But the awareness many of us gained these last months does reveal a truth about our personal relationships worth probing on Yom Kippur when the wellbeing of those relationships weighs heavily upon us. The insight is this: we can never really know other people’s inner journeys unless we invest the time and effort to hear and understand them.

Hearing and understanding aren’t easy, and their neglect comes at a cost.

“The way we lose each other can be very simple,” explains Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. “One of my patients describes how he [used to spend] time with his son....‘We would hike a mountain, a difficult climb, side by side, both focused on reaching the top. Then we would come down a different way, one behind the other to the car, and drive home. We did this many times. In thinking back, I have a clear memory of many of these climbs, but no memory of anything my son said to me or I to him....The mountain got between us.’”⁴

Doesn’t it remind you of the tale we read last week – Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac on Mount Moriah? Blind and deaf to all but his own self-certain “sanctity” Abraham had a single focus: himself and his cultic fanaticism. How had he never once questioned God’s command? How had he not anticipated Sarah’s heartache? How had he not heard the worry in Isaac’s voice? How had he not seen the ram God provided in Isaac’s stead? Abraham’s is the story, to

² Ginsburg, J., dissenting, “*Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder, Attorney General, et al.*,” *Supreme Court of the United States*, 2013.

³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*.

⁴ Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, pp.157-158.

the extreme, of the outcome of complete self-centeredness, the price of being closed to others beyond ourselves. Even the angels in heaven knew he was wrong, their tears streaming down into Isaac's eyes as he lay bound on the altar causing weak vision, always the result of narrow perspective. And so father and son hiked up Moriah together but came down separately and never spoke again. The mountain got between them.

As Dr. King beseeched us "to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope," Yom Kippur entreats us to hew out of the mountains of estrangement that may have risen up between us and those we love, stones of new understanding as foundations for repairing and rebuilding our relationships. If we have learned anything these last months, it is to open our eyes.

The traditional list of *al chets* we read tonight includes this: *Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha b'tzarut ayin*, "for the sin we have committed against You by constricting our sight," by wearing blinders so we cannot see outside the range of our own limited focus.

So often we refuse to consider anyone else's point of view. We are like the blind men in the Indian parable. A dozen blind men grab hold of the same elephant, yet each perceives it as something different: one holds its trunk and declares "it's a hose," another its foot and contends "it's a pillar," a third its side and insists "it's a wall." Each one swears he alone has it right.⁵

"I will not live out of me. I will not see with others' eyes,"⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson maintained. His words capture our human limitation. The prism through which we view the world is ground by our own experience of the world. Therefore even when we do try to "see things differently" – to understand other people's perspectives – even then we tend to measure their experiences against our own narrow frames of reference, and the "relevant subtleties" elude us.

For example, when we examine racism solely through the lens of anti-Semitism, we fail to recognize that racism, like anti-Semitism, represents a unique evil. Though born of the same inability to discern in those who are different a common humanity, anti-Semitism and racism level distinct social impacts. The Jewish experience in the ghettos of the Lower East Side can't be compared to the Black experience of the inner city. The ladder of upward mobility many of us were able to climb successfully generations ago has seen its rungs all but collapse. The percentage of African Americans represented among the poor in this country is far greater than it has ever been for Jews.

And we fall into the same trap equating personal experiences. Who hasn't felt the frustration of recounting a disappointment to a spouse, a sibling or a friend, only to be interrupted by a well-meaning: "Oh yes, I know exactly how you feel! I remember when something just like that happened to me!" when the two incidents weren't alike at all. We've all experienced this, and we've all done it. We hear in other people's stories some resonance with our own, and with the best intentions we sometimes forget: it's not about us.

The Maggid of Mezeritch once warned his disciples: "You must be nothing but an ear which hears what [others are] saying. The moment you start hearing what you yourself are saying, you must stop."⁷ Hearing the others in our lives requires *tzimtzum*, in Hebrew the "contraction" of the self, the silencing of our own assumptions to understand their needs, their hopes.

⁵ Adapted from Randy Wang, <http://www.cs.princeton.edu/~rywang/berkeley/258/parable.html>.

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson in Harold Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, p.199.

⁷ Adapted from "How to Say Torah," in Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*.

Tzimtzum

“They say that, in his youth, the Baal Shem Tov studied eight hundred books of the Kabbalah. But the first time he saw the Maggid of Mezeritch face to face, he instantly discovered he knew nothing at all.”⁸ Human understanding comes only through looking into another’s eyes.

The only way to heal the broken society we inhabit, or to mend the relationships most precious to us, is to see others for who they are, not for who we thought they were or imagine them to be. Bridging personal divides requires it. Bridging social divides requires it. And here our congregation has a role to play deepening the relationships we have built through the years with churches and mosques. The work of racial justice doesn’t end there of course; it demands committed, sustained action. But knowing one another is where it must begin.

“We [are] truly all brothers [and sisters],” Jackie Robinson believed. If we “accept the Oneness of God,” we must “accept...the Oneness of [humanity].”⁹ People of faith share a conviction: the same Divine spark that animated the first human being glows in us all.

So I return to the story of creation.

The great mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that God formed the universe through an act of *tzimtzum*, contracting the light of the Divine presence to make room for the physical world. But God’s brightness was so overpowering, that the vessels into which it was gathered shattered in a blaze of Divine sparks. The sparks remain, and can be witnessed glowing in all created things, and in each of us. Our human task is to find them; to tend the Divine light burning in every human being.

When we are able to look at others and see it, no matter their color, their ethnicity, their gender, their age, their faith, their education, their wealth, or their politics, we will have taken a first step toward building a society at peace with itself. When we learn to look into the eyes of those we love and see what heals and what hurts, we will have found that stone of understanding on which to build stronger – or fashion anew – the closeness we seek.

The New Year has begun. May we begin as well.

Amen.

⁸ Adapted from “Knowledge,” in Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*.

⁹ Jackie Robinson and Alfred Duckett, *I Never Had It Made*, p.236.