

Yom Kippur Morning 2020

Rabbi Benjamin David

Arcade Fire sings: 'Children wake up. Hold your mistake up.'

It's time to acknowledge how poorly we've done in responding to racism. It's time for us to wake up. And, yes, I'm talking to you.

If your response to George Floyd's death was anything but horror, I am talking to you. If you responded with righteous disdain to the protests that stretched down every city street in America, I am talking to you. If your focus was on the damage caused by rioters or you found a way to somehow justify the shocking death of not only George Floyd, but Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castille, or countless other black men and women killed by the police, this sermon is for you.

If you think your political party or your town or your neighborhood or your home is devoid altogether of racism, I'm talking to you.

Because I'm talking to all of us.

Let's be clear: A country with racism in its veins means we are all guilty. A nation with lynchings in its not too distant past means we are all culpable.

It began before there officially was a United States with the arrival of the White Lion, that fateful ship carrying 20 African men and women to these shores in 1619. They were sold off as indentured servants.

So came the centuries of state sanctioned slavery that followed and the deep rooted racial inequities that continued even after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, in which President Lincoln declared that 'all persons held as slaves...are, and hence forth shall be free.'

It continued beyond the long overdue end to school segregation that came with Brown vs Board of Education in 1954. It continued beyond the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which ended segregation in public places and discrimination based on race.

Even with so much well-meaning legislation, systemic racism exists today in real ways, with social gaps too wide, and prejudice that runs deep, deeper than police stations, deeper than Washington, further than education, beyond healthcare, employment, geography, and age.

Let's see: 40% of all homeless people are black, the number of black prisoners in America is 5x the number of white prisoners. African Americans are more likely to have diabetes, high blood pressure, more likely to have a stroke, heart disease, or cancer and more likely to die from Covid-19.

Maybe it's because close to 10% of African Americans don't have health insurance (versus 5% of those who identify as white).

And maybe our African American brothers and sisters often don't have health insurance because African Americans are more likely to be unemployed than their Caucasian counterparts. Black women are twice as likely to be jobless, for instance, compared to white women and those who are employed are statistically paid less than white co-workers. Black men make on average 73% of what white men make. Those who are black are also less likely to be hired as CEOs even with similar resumes.

Of the 500 CEOs that run a Fortune 500 company, that conglomerate of wealth and power and influence, of the 500, only four are black, including Marvin Ellison of Lowe's and Kenneth Frazier of the pharmaceutical company Merck. Only one black woman ever has served as CEO for a Fortune 500 company, which Ursula Burns did as the head of Xerox until 2016.

Maybe it's because our African American neighbors have fewer opportunities to go to college. If African American students do arrive at college they're unlikely to find professors and administrators who look like them. Only 8% of colleges have a person of color currently serving as president. Only 4% of college professors in America are people of color.

And lest there be any doubt or equivocation: It's not because our black friends don't work as hard or don't have the motivation; it's because they are trapped in a maze where they meet dead-ends again and again when it comes to opportunity, resources, and help.

Who's going to do better on the SATs, the white student in Moorestown who's afforded every tutor and SAT master class or the black student in Camden who has to support his family because dad's in jail and he missed two weeks of class because the single working mom couldn't find time to get him the flu shot this year?

Who's going to have a shinier resume: The kid with the college counselor who can help pin point the key activities that might engender a 'yes' from Cornell or the kid who doesn't have a computer at home, let alone a counselor to help him?

Let's say it succinctly: White privilege doesn't mean our lives have been easy. God only knows how hard some of us have had it. White privilege means that the color of our skin has not been a barrier to colleges, jobs, raises, voting access, in the way it often is for those of minority races.

So, yes, racism is real. Yes, black lives matter. Yes, you can be attuned to racism in our country while also standing up for other groups in need. Yes, you can be an ally without believing the police force is inherently evil, but rather in need of drastic reform.

Yes, racism is an issue for democrats, republicans, young and old, urban and rural.

Let's stop debating whether it exists and talk about what to do about it.

Wake up. Hold your mistake up.

What can we do about our colossus of mistakes? What can we do to reverse centuries of wrong, all the sloppy and lazy and fearful decisions that led to an officer kneeling on the neck of a black man for all to see?

My teacher Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman starts us off by reminding us of what won't work.

He said this just a few weeks ago: 'Begin with what we want to prevent: a real-life rerun of Les Miserables, Victor Hugo's reflection on Europe's abortive 1830 and 1848 revolutions. The operative word is "abortive." People marched and were killed and nothing changed. Nor do we want another French-style revolution with a bloody "reign of terror." (Already there are calls to disband the police, as if the police per se are the root of our problem).

But we dare not return to where we were with some social band-aids here and there, until someone else is murdered and we start all over again.'

Then he asks: 'How do we get peaceful revolution: an evocation of the national conscience that finally ends racism; that invests seriously and heavily in reversing past injustices; that uproots obscene discrepancies...that resurrects respect for decency; and guarantees the simple joys of work and of play and of safety, food, and shelter?'

How do we do that?

Well, first, you can vote. Our congregation has signed on to the Religious Action Center's Civic Engagement Campaign, which means that we have committed to having every single voter eligible member of our congregation go to the polls on November 3 to have their voice heard. We are also engaged in non-partisan outreach to first-time voters and those historically less inclined to vote.

You love this country? Vote. You're fed up? Vote. You're tired of venting on Facebook? Vote. You're sick of having to explain unjust outcomes to your kids? Vote. You're disgusted by hate speech and widespread ignorance? Vote. You want to live in an America that lives up to the high ideals of our Constitution? Vote. You're frightened? Vote. You believe we can do better? Vote. You want the America of tomorrow to be better than the America of today?

You get the point.

To eradicate racism we must eradicate racist policy that deals in everything from inner city infrastructure to criminal justice reform, mandatory minimum sentencing, the death penalty, adoption rules, school funding, health care affordability and access to clean drinking water.

This means supporting candidates who are ready to not only own and acknowledge the realities of racism, but ready to propose and sign onto bold, transformative legislation.

Two, you can read. Adults, read *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. Read *Between the World and Me*, as many of us did this summer, wherein author Ta Nehisi Coates challenges us when he writes: 'You have not grappled with your own myths and narratives and discovered the plunder everywhere around us.' Read *White Fragility* and *Before the Mayflower*.

Read Caroline Randall William's stunning piece in the New York Times in which she explains that the appropriate monuments to the age of slavery are not Confederate flags or Confederate generals high atop their horses.

Her essay makes clear once and for all that such symbols not only deny the heart wrenching story of slaves and descendants of slaves, but elevate the task masters, the unforgiving owners, and the culture of profound discrimination that pervaded so much of this country a century and a half ago.

You want a monument, she asks. 'My light brown-brown-blackness is a living testament to the rules, the practices, the causes of the Old South...My body is a monument, my skin is a monument... My very existence is a relic of slavery and Jim Crow...White southern men – my ancestors – took what they wanted from women they did not love, over whom they had extraordinary power, and then failed to claim their children.... I am proof that whatever else the South might have been, or might believe itself to be, it was and is a space whose prosperity and sense of romance and nostalgia were built upon the grievous exploitation of black life.'

You can also read *Just Mercy*, about unlawful convictions in the deep south and Bryan Stevenson, the lawyer who is working to undo them.

You can read black authors, black journalists, the expressions of people of color of both yesterday and today in an attempt to stretch your perspective and broaden your understanding of what it means to be something other than white in America.

Parents, here are books you can read with your kids about race: *Hair Love*, *Each Kindness*, *The Youngest Marcher*, *Resist*, *Not My Idea*, *All American Boys*, or *Stamped*.

And yes you can find this sermon online soon so you can check this list to make sure you've read as many of these as possible.

You can also read...the Bible. You want to know about race? Read about Moses marrying Tziphora, a Kushite woman. Kushite is bible speak for Ethiopian. You can read about Abraham taking Hagar into his home. You can read about Joseph extending a hand to his Egyptian brethren in their time of need.

But let's be clear there are also numerous cautionary tales in our bible as well, instances when our own people were not the welcoming and compassionate people God would have them be. We learn from these tales too.

King David, a mighty warrior, who conquered so many of the territories that surrounded then Israel, is not chosen to build the great Temple in Jerusalem precisely because of his violent past.

As for Moses and Tziphora, the Israelite community is shocked and dismayed when they meet Moses' bride, a shameful and offensive response that would echo through the ages.

If you're feeling particularly ambitious you can also read the Talmud. Or at least part of it, such as Tractate *Avodah Zarah*, the volume that deals with idolatry. I say this because, a few months ago, Rabbi Avi Killip wrote in the Forward that the Talmud's understanding of idolatry two thousand years ago might inform our understanding of racism today.

The rabbis back then saw idolatry as an existential threat to the most treasured and valued Jewish ideas.

To associate ourselves with racism today or to encourage racism in any way is to buy into a kind of idolatry, a rejection of all that we hold dear as Jews: welcoming the other, extending a hand, lifting up the fallen, choosing compassion and understanding in the face of hate.

Hold your mistake up.

We're great these days at telling people what they shouldn't do: Don't go to that restaurant, don't buy that brand, don't go to that camp or school or car dealership or ... whatever. So let's say we agree at long last that racism is unequivocally wrong.

What else can we do to try to end racism in America once and for all? Another answer lies in actively embracing diversity in your own life as fully as you can. Giving of your time to those who have been marginalized or cast out. Being conscious of how you spend your money, the words you choose, the lessons you share with your kids, even what you do and don't watch on TV.

Are there people of color on the panel you're listening to? Why not? Speak up. Are there people of color represented on the school board? Why not? Speak up. Are there people of color in positions of power on the local, state and national level? Why not? Speak up. Are you constantly surrounded by people who look like you, pray like you, think like you? Why?

Let's acknowledge too that this sermon may be deeply uncomfortable for some. At this very moment you're formulating your angry email to me, how I'm too naïve or too young or somehow misguided. And that's OK. Send your email. For every statistic and anecdote I shared, you'll share a refuting statistic and anecdote. Maybe I am naïve and young and misguided. Maybe.

If I'll acknowledge that then maybe you'll acknowledge that your anger toward me is misdirected and perhaps should be channeled instead to a place of deep searching, a process that will have you explore why and how you can explain away the blight of racism before your very eyes.

I won't apologize for saying what may be hard to hear. I'm no Isaiah, the prophet we heard this morning, who urged the Jewish community of his day to take seriously the values of *rahamim*, compassion, and *hesed*, lovingkindness.

And certainly I'm no Moses, the iconic leader we read about in this morning's Torah portion, who stood tall before every Israelite and urged them to define community in the broadest possible sense.

I'm not them, but I am invested in you. I care about you. I care about us. And I am deeply invested in the future lives of your kids and mine.

I want what you want, for them to grow up into a world of greater togetherness, greater understanding, a more loving world, where we elevate the humanity in each other, not break each other down based on how we look or what we believe.

So, no, on this Day of Atonement, I won't apologize.

It's time for all of us to open our eyes. It's time for all of us to...wake up.