

Removing the Stumbling Block: Talking About Race

My favorite book by Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, is called *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, first published in 1937. In it, Kaplan seeks to "reconstruct" our thinking about God, using Shabbat and the Jewish holidays as frames within which to think about the meaning of Divinity. Each holiday, he suggests, offers a different way in which to both understand and experience the sacred. For Shabbat, God is "The Power that Makes for Salvation"; for Sukkot, "The Power that Makes for Cooperation"; for Passover, "The Power that Makes for Freedom."

For Yom Kippur, Kaplan talks about God as "The Power That Makes for the Regeneration of Human Nature." In this chapter of the book, he explores Jewish ideas about "sin." He suggests that - already by the 1930s - the concept of "sin" had become an empty one for most American Jews, and so needed to be reconstructed and understood in a new way.

Kaplan affirmed the traditional understanding of sin as something that estranges us from the divine, that separates us from God. But Kaplan's God is not some Being "out there" that stands apart from us and judges us; rather, It is a Power that functions in and through us, a Power with which we can align ourselves to achieve "the best that is in us," individually and collectively. Thus, Kaplan argued, "the failure to live up to the best that is in us means that our souls are not attuned to the divine, that we have betrayed God."

Sin is anything which derails us, which keeps us out of alignment with That which enables us to achieve our highest values and aspirations.

Kaplan goes on to consider how the ancient Yom Kippur rituals - those described in the verses from Leviticus that we read a little earlier - how they were meant to atone for sin. At the center of the holiest day of the year is, in Kaplan's words, the symbolic cleansing of the Temple sanctuary "from contamination by the sins of the people," in order to "qualify the sanctuary for God's Presence."

Kaplan suggests that the Temple sanctuary symbolized the collective life of the Israelite people, through which each individual could achieve his or her fulfillment as a human being. The sanctuary is a symbol of "all the social arrangements, customs and institutions" that exist in order to help us achieve our highest values and aspirations. If the sanctuary itself could become "unclean," Kaplan says, then this means that our social institutions can "become disqualified for the purpose of serving God, that is to say, of contributing to the unity, harmony, and integrity of personal and social life, whereby life becomes holy."

At the center of our ancestors' Yom Kippur ritual was an understanding that a community can go astray, that our personal and collective transgressions can sever our relationship to that which is holy—that Power in the universe that is the very source of our humanity. There are situations in which our social institutions, the structures by which we organize our collective life, become - in Kaplan's phrase - "disqualified for the purpose of serving God." So the ritual to re-sanctify the Temple each Yom Kippur symbolizes the need to re-

sanctify our communal life, those social structures through which we seek to connect with the Godliness in ourselves and in others.

Kaplan goes on to make a very interesting comment, which he emphasizes: "*The sins of the individual corrupt the social structure, and the corruption of the social institutions spread the contagion among individuals.*"

The haftarah selection from the prophet Isaiah confirms Kaplan's understanding that atoning for "sin" involves not just ritual uncleanness, but responding to social distress. For Isaiah, that distress was found in mistreatment of the poor and vulnerable, in abuse of workers and a single-minded focus on personal gain. These were the sins that disconnected the people from God.

At the beginning of the haftarah, the prophet imagines God calling for a road to be cleared, a pathway by which the Holy One can be reunited with a people that has gone astray. "Prepare, prepare the road--yes, clear a thoroughfare, remove the stumbling block from my people's way!" There are obstacles, stumbling blocks that keep us from the Godly path, the path to - in Kaplan's words, "the unity, harmony, and integrity of personal and social life."

There are many "stumbling blocks" in our time, many things that block the "unity, harmony and integrity of personal and social life." One of the most profound, the one I'd like to discuss with you today, is the stumbling block of racism. If anything has desecrated our sanctuary, our collective life as Americans, it is the sin of racism. It is all around us, yet we barely know how to talk about it. It weighs so heavily on our history, on our social institutions, on our personal relationships. It is a political and moral issue, but also a profoundly spiritual issue, because the persistence of racial injustice does massive harm not only to black bodies, although certainly that, but also to our spirits - our black and brown and white spirits, our Jewish spirits, our collective American spirit.

Much of what I want to share with you today comes from a remarkable book written by John A. Powell, called *Racing To Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society*. Powell is a philosopher and professor of law, and in this book he has synthesized a massive amount of literature, from history to critical race theory to feminist and gender studies to neuroscience and law. It's an important book for us today not just because of his insights about race and racism, but because he sees his project as an inherently spiritual one.

Powell argues that racism is not a static entity, a "thing" that we can point to, but the result of a process, which he calls "racialization." We need to think of race, he suggests, not as a noun, but as a verb. He writes,

By racialization, I refer to the set of practices, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements that both reflect and help to create and maintain race-based outcomes in society. Because racialization is a set of historical and cultural processes, it does not have one particular meaning. Instead, it describes conditions and norms that are constantly evolving and interacting with the sociopolitical

environment, varying from location to location as well as throughout different periods in history.

Powell describes a process by which—beginning in the earliest decades of this nation's history—captive African people brought to these shores came to be defined as "black," and "black" became a category that meant less than human, not capable of full citizenship, and most significantly, capable of being enslaved. This category of "black" was defined in relation to people who became designated as white—those who could not become chattel slaves. Neither English nor African people arrived in this country with set racial roles; those roles were created and developed by people in power, for the purpose of maintaining their own control, privilege, and wealth. Maintaining the boundaries between "white" and "black" entailed terrible violence, a violence that plagues us to this day.

As Powell notes, race is a biological fiction, but a powerful historical and social reality. But what is important to remember about this process of "racialization" is that it is fluid and evolving. The structures by which white privilege is maintained, the institutions by which people of color are oppressed, have changed over time, as the historical context changes. Yet because as a society we tend to understand racism as static, as defined by certain beliefs and practices, we have a difficult time recognizing it when those practices change.

Powell describes how our current understanding of racism in America is still shaped by the era of Jim Crow, of legal, intentional racial separation and discrimination. Because of this, our culture tends to understand racism as "conscious discriminatory activity, directed at a particular victim, by racist individuals." Powell critiques this approach, not just in our public imagination but in our legal system, which relies on the need for racist "intent" and the need for "bad actors" to carry out racist actions or policies. Because much of the overt legal aspects of Jim Crow have been removed, people can claim that we are somehow beyond racism as a society. Powell observes, "Virtually all sectors of society now renounce racism. To call someone racist impugns not only the legality of the person's actions but also his or her morality. Indeed, to call someone racist today is seen as incendiary and a form of character assassination."

This is part of what makes it so hard for those of us who are white to talk about racism. When people of color relate to us their experiences of racism, we hear that as a moral critique, an assault on our image of ourselves as good people, rather than a report of experiences that come about because of a complex process of bias, discrimination, and institutional oppression of which we are a part.

Powell goes on to say, "The process of racialization has changed and is changing. The number of old-style explicit racists is declining. Even though we talk about white and non-white attitudes, a range of attitudes and conditions is reflected in each racialized group. What may be more interesting is that most of us carry conflicting racial attitudes within ourselves... We are in a space in which our old ways of thinking about race do not serve us well and can easily lead us to misunderstand the opportunities and challenges before us."

The rest of Powell's book is an attempt to address some of those opportunities and challenges, and I cannot do it a fraction of justice here this morning. I just want to lift up a few of his points, and think with you about next steps we can take as individuals and as a community.

Powell explores two "areas of racialization" that he sees as most relevant today. The first area he calls "structural racialization"--all of the legal and institutional arrangements that have given rise to many of the statistics we heard earlier: the staggering number of African American men in prison; the disproportionate percentage of people of color who suffer poverty and unemployment; the creation of public spaces--inner cities--that are starved of resources and the simultaneous creation of suburbs that are predominantly white and better off. There are historical and legal reasons for the "race based outcomes" that we now see, everything from the GI Bill to housing policy to sentencing for drug crimes, and it is incumbent upon us to learn this history and to understand how we have come to find ourselves in such a segregated, highly imbalanced society.

The other area Powell talks about has been revealed by neuroscience, and a growing understanding that much that happens in our brains is hidden from our conscious awareness. This is the area that Powell calls "implicit bias." This is important because, as I mentioned earlier, much of the discourse in America about racism assumes that words or actions or policies are racist only if someone intends them to be. Powell points out that much of what we think and do does not stem from conscious intent at all, but is shaped by race-based biases that inform our thinking by the time we are three or four years old.

Because of this, both individual and institutional discrimination can happen even when there is no conscious prejudice or ill will. Powell goes on to explain how our implicit bias informs public policy, and how the resulting reality can then reinforce our implicit bias. "For example," he notes, "in our society, many people associate African American men with crime--a cognitive association. Currently, African American men in the U.S. are several times more likely to go to prison than white men, a structural 'verification' of that association...The more often African American men are charged with crimes, the more the mental association is reinforced, which in turn primes the thinking of law enforcement and court officials."

You can see how this becomes a vicious cycle, as our biases create the realities that then re-affirm our biases. This perhaps is what Kaplan was alluding to, what I quoted earlier: *The sins of the individual corrupt the social structure, and the corruption of the social institutions spread the contagion among individuals.*

Powell concludes his discussion of implicit bias with this remark: "The existence of implicit bias does not mean that we are all secretly racist. It does suggest that we are complex and conflicted and that this conflict can be organized to make either our biases or our egalitarian aspirations more salient."

That is, we have a choice. We can scientifically prove that bias and prejudice exist within us; that cannot be disputed. What we do with the complex tangle of associations that we

have imbibed from our culture is, however, up to us. Powell urges us to act on our "egalitarian aspirations," our dreams and hopes for a truly free and equal society. We can only do this together, he suggests, because "race-ing" as a verb is a process that we do to one another, with one another. "Race," he says, "functions in collective ways that we cannot alter solely through individual will."

Powell suggests that in this historical moment we have two significant tasks before us: one, to "learn a great deal about how to talk about race in ways that are not divisive"; and two, "to make sure our institutions do the work we want them to do." The latter task is a matter of politics and policies; of organizing and changing laws. It is what we are trying to do as a congregation as we become involved in efforts for criminal justice reform.

We also have opportunities to take up powell's first task, "to learn how to talk about race in ways that are not divisive." And I don't think what he means here is an avoidance of hard conversations. Rather, he is challenging us to see how we are often acting from unconscious notions that affect our speech and our actions in ways we are not aware. This is why we have to learn together - to explore how racial bias manifests in us and through us, and to get better at recognizing it in ourselves and others in order to challenge and transform it. This work is of primary import for those of us who are white, because it is our speech and our actions which cause so much damage.

Powell's call to talk about race in new ways is also, I think, a challenge to we white people who identify as "progressive" or "liberal," because it is so easy to condemn those "other" white people whom we see as racist. Of course we should condemn racist speech and racist actions, but not by separating ourselves or implying that we are somehow "pure" and free of such taint. We are not, we cannot be; if we have white privilege, we cannot simply slough it off, or step away from it. To "learn how to talk about race in ways that are not divisive" should be not be read as, "Hey, you angry black people, stop yelling at us good white people," but rather, "Hey, white people, stop divvying up who is racist and who is not, and let's figure out a way to talk about this together."

I want to thank my colleague, Rabbi Fred Dobb, for making me aware of a wonderful TedX talk by the hip-hop deejay Jay Smooth that addresses the challenge of talking about race. In the video, Smooth notes a tendency by well-meaning people to avoid all discussion of race, and then deciding that by avoiding the topic all together, racism itself has been left behind.

Smooth suggests that we do this avoidance dance because of an incorrect way of thinking about what it means to be a "good person." He points out that too often we talk about racism in the same we talk about tonsils --either you have them or you don't. Once you've had your tonsils removed, they're gone. So we can believe that we've had our racism tonsillectomy, removed our prejudice, and voila! We are clean and good. We then get very upset when someone suggests that we did or said something racist, because how can that be? Our prejudice has been removed! We're clean!

Rather, Smooth suggests, we should talk about race using a "dental hygiene" model. Staying clean is an ongoing process, and when someone suggests I have food in my teeth, I don't say, "How can that be! I brushed my teeth once, I'm a clean person!" I understand that to have clean teeth, I have to be constantly vigilant, constantly engaged. So it is when it comes to confronting racism, in ourselves and in the world around us.

Smooth goes on to say that, for the sake of working together on the bigger issues of institutionalized racism, we need to "re-conceptualize being a good person, and keep in mind that we're not good despite our imperfections; it is the connection we maintain with our imperfections that allows us to be good. Our connection with our personal and our common imperfections - being mindful of our personal and our common imperfections - is what allows us to be good to each other and be good to ourselves."

This is a beautiful *teshuvah* teaching. We white people must stop being terrified of our imperfections when it comes to dealing with race and racism. We can recognize our white privilege, we can acknowledge when we have caused harm with our words and actions, even if unintentional; we can listen far more closely and with far less defensiveness when people of color attempt to relay their experiences to us. We can do all this because "it is the connection we maintain with our imperfections that allows us to be good."

I'd like to end with some words from another powerful book that I read recently. The author is a black lesbian Buddhist teacher named Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, and the book is called *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening through Race, Sexuality and Gender*.

The idea of "tenderness" is at the core of Manuel's book. She writes:

Awakening from the distortion of oppression begins with tenderness: we recognize our own wounded tenderness, which develops into the tenderness of vulnerability and culminates in the tenderness that comes with heartfelt and authentic liberation...The complete experience of tenderness is to acknowledge that within the seamless life shared between us we cannot parcel out hate to some without affecting the whole of humanity. When we reach that kind of tenderness--complete tenderness--liberation is won.

For Zenju Manuel, the path of spiritual awakening and liberation has to pass through the experience of suffering – our own suffering, and our awareness of the suffering of others. She says, "Spirituality must acknowledge the body and the denigration of certain types of bodies in the world. We cannot close our eyes to these phenomena if we really want to be awake and aware." She continues:

We have, down through the ages, developed many means to attempt to heal, mend, and atone for our actions. Yet while our spiritual paths have assisted us, our aspirations to be 'better' human beings may inadvertently hinder us. To be 'good' people we tend to bypass the messiness of our lives in order to enter the gate of tranquility...[But] no matter which way we approach peace, it seems we must cross the burning threshold of human conditioning to enter it. So, before we leap to the

universal, the true essence, or spirit, why not start where we are as human beings?
We must carve a path through the flames of our human condition.

All of these thinkers whose words I've shared with you today—powell, Smooth, Manuel—all of them invite us to embrace the messiness, the difficulty, the sorrow and pain of racism, as well as the other oppressions that have affected us.

As Jews, we are invited to consider our own complicated history, to consider how the effects of anti-Semitism have left their marks on us, and how that experience interacts with the racial identities we carry. "We must carve a path through the flames of our human condition."

As we engage in this holy and difficult work, may we be guided by a spirit of compassion and humility, by willingness and an openness to truth, even, and especially, truth which is hard to hear. May we who are white listen closely to the voices of people of color and the testimony of your lives. May we, together, engage in the holy task of cleansing the sanctuary of sin, of removing the stumbling blocks that thwart the realization of "the unity, harmony, and integrity of personal and social life, whereby life becomes holy."

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Sources for this talk:

Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (The Reconstructionist Press, 1962)

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Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, and Gender* (Wisdom Publications, 2015)

TEDxHampshireCollege - Jay Smooth - How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU>

