

Slavery and Its Atonement

In the Yom Kippur Torah service, we heard from two of the central models of leadership in the Torah: the priest and the prophet. The priests oversaw the rituals that were designed to allow God's Presence to dwell among the Israelites, via the sacred space known as the Mishkan, the holy sanctuary. The priests were concerned with all the details for creating a holy community – from the rules of animal sacrifice to the particulars of loving our neighbor and the stranger as ourselves.

The prophets - like Isaiah, whom we read for the haftarah – had a different role. They called on the people to uphold the covenant, to fulfill the demands of justice and lovingkindness. They spoke about geo-political realities, war and exile, and reminded the Israelites that religious ritual would have no effect if the people ignored their moral obligations. They sometimes condemned, sometimes comforted, using poetic language to get the people back on track.

Like many of us, I suspect, I have always found the prophets to be a bit more accessible than the priests. The Temple in Jerusalem, and all those unpleasant animal sacrifices, are long gone. And the language of the priests seems so alien: the obsession with ritual purity; the endless details - of sacrifices, of strange skin diseases, of the architecture of the tabernacle in the desert. Who wouldn't prefer the inspiring poetry of Isaiah and Amos, calling us to take the poor into our homes, to let justice roll down like water?

But as I grapple with all that is going on in the world around us, and especially in our country these days, I am finding the priestly voice in the Torah more relevant, even useful. The priests were deeply concerned with sin, with those actions that estrange us from God and from one another. So, with your permission, I'd like to lift up today some ancient priestly concepts found in the Torah, with the hope that they might help us think and act in useful ways as we confront our contemporary sins.

The first priestly concept is this: Taking responsibility for a murdered person found on the road.

In chapter 21 of Devarim, Deuteronomy, we read about an odd situation: a person is found murdered on the road in between cities, and no one knows who did the crime. The leaders of all the cities in the surrounding area are instructed to come out and measure the distance from the body to each of their cities. The leaders of the city that are closest to the body then have to take responsibility for dealing with the guilt associated with this murder. They join with the priests in a strange and arcane ritual, which I won't go into.

What fascinates me about this scenario is the Biblical notion of blood guilt. When a crime has occurred that involves the death of a human being, the land itself - and those living in it - become polluted. Even if the people directly responsible for the crime can't be found, that guilt must be dealt with; the pollution must be cleaned up, or all the inhabitants of the land will suffer.

Fast forward from the ancient world of the Torah to this past April. I was in New Orleans visiting a dear friend who grew up there. My friend is a fierce fighter for social justice, and in recent years she has been particularly interested in learning more about her family history. They are white southerners, and her ancestors owned slaves. As part of her education about the realities of slavery in Louisiana, she invited me to go with her to the Whitney plantation, just outside of New Orleans.

Now, you have to understand that there are lots of plantation tours in that area - they advertise their "beautiful antebellum architecture" and invite you to "get a feel for the Antebellum South as you look out over rows of oak trees to the Mississippi river from the porch of a plantation home." This is a decidedly one-sided version of plantation history. There is only one tour you can take that shows what life was like on a plantation for the majority of people who lived there - the enslaved Africans and African-Americans. The Whitney plantation is an amazing place, open just three years, and is still one of the only museums dedicated to the experience of slavery in the U.S.

My friend and I were guided by a man who had grown up in the area, his family descended from the slaves who had worked these sugar plantations. The Whitney plantation shows the conditions in which enslaved people lived and died, and also honors their humanity, which had been so consciously and emphatically stripped away. We read lists of names of people bought and sold in Louisiana in the 1800s - often just first names, because that's all that was recorded. We saw a memorial to all the children who died on the plantation. We stood silently at another memorial, to the participants in the largest slave uprising in the South in 1811, when over one hundred slaves marched on New Orleans, where they were defeated by army regulars and a militia of local white people. We read excerpts from interviews conducted in the 1930s with former slaves, remembrances of their experiences in what they called "the slave days."

The guide on our visit emphasized the importance of knowing this history for all Americans, black and white. And I came to a realization that has been sitting with me ever since. Until we, as Americans, do proper *teshuvah*, penance, for the sin of slavery, we will continue to be stuck in the place we are now. I realized that the current administration in Washington is just a symptom of something much deeper. I realized that the hateful acts now blooming across the U.S. - from the killing of unarmed Black people to the draconian targeting of immigrants to the racist and anti-Semitic symbols being pasted up on our university campuses - all of this is a coming to the surface of something that never went away, that was never properly dealt with. And this is a reality that African-American folks and other people of color in this country have known for a long time, but I haven't.

As I thought about my experience at the Whitney plantation, the image of the unclaimed murder victim in the book of Deuteronomy came to mind. I realized that I had not come out of my city to look, to really see, the damage that had been done in this country, and how it was connected to me. My New Orleans friend, you could say, is from the city that is closest to the victim - her direct ancestors owned slaves. Mine did not. My ancestors didn't even arrive in this country until decades after the Civil War. But the Torah teaches us that

until the proper repentance is done, the blood guilt remains. And I too need to measure my distance from it.

We are very far from even beginning to account for the blood that stains this land. The blood of millions of native people, annihilated by disease and brutal violence and other calamities after the arrival of Europeans in 1492. The blood of millions of enslaved people, worked and whipped and tortured to death from the earliest colonial days to the end of the Civil War. And the blood that continued to flow after Reconstruction, the thousands of African Americans killed by mob violence. The Torah says we have to come out of our cities, and we have to look. We have to measure our own distance to the crime. We have to say, "I might be accountable, in some way, for this atrocity." How am I connected? What measuring stick links me to the foundational sins of this nation?

Which brings me to priestly concept #2: Sin is not a private affair. To the ancient Israelite priests, every individual sin, large and small, has an effect on the relationship between the entire community and God, and also on the relationships among the community. As one scholar notes, "the priestly legislation was designed to protect the basic social structure of the nation." (*A Severe Mercy*, p. 55) Sin is social, and its effects are felt by the entire community.

After that visit to the Whitney plantation, I realized that the sin of slavery affects me, regardless of my personal history. I am implicated in it because the effects of slavery linger, and not just in the monuments to the Confederacy yet to come down. The Whitney plantation - and now, in the National Museum of African American History and Culture - are long-awaited beginnings of the telling of a crucial piece of American history. I have begun to educate myself in that history, because I was largely ignorant of it. I did not know that the slave economy of the South, from the late 18th century until the Civil War, was the engine of the industrial revolution. I did not know that the cotton produced in the ever-expanding slave-holding states fueled the cotton mills not just in New England but across the sea, in Britain. Cotton was, in the words of one historian, "the single most important commodity in the global economy of the 1800s." (*Half Has Never Been Told*, p. 426). And it was slave labor that produced that commodity - a system based in the regular and well thought-out use of torture on the bodies of black people.

After the Civil War, chattel slavery ended, but the wealth it had produced, the economic systems it created, did not. Neither did the racial hierarchies that slavery burned into the psyche of our nation. While slavery has existed for all of human history, the idea that enslaved people are subhuman or nonhuman, and that - as codified by American law - only people of color could be enslaved, that is a modern invention. And the legacy of this invention is still with us. For a brief flicker of time after the Civil War, during Reconstruction, an attempt was made to create a multi-racial society where formerly enslaved people would have basic political and economic rights. Black people were given the vote, public school systems were established, formerly enslaved people were elected to local and national government.

But by 1877, Reconstruction had been brought to a violent halt. Anti-Reconstruction Democrats took control of the U.S. Congress in 1874, the national Republican party agreed to abandon Reconstruction policies in 1876, and across the South, people intent on resurrecting white supremacy had retaken state legislatures through a program of assassination and terror. What became known as Jim Crow segregation followed, its many laws enforced by systematic violence against black people, and any whites who dared ally themselves with them.

It was in this post-Reconstruction context that my ancestors, that many of our Eastern European Jewish ancestors, arrived in this country. Our people faced discrimination and hardship, but they were able to do what other European immigrants were able to do - and that was to effectively become white. Although my grandparents and great-grandparents arrived with very little, the American dream was accessible to them. They could get bank loans and mortgages, they could benefit from the G.I. Bill and the New Deal. They faced discrimination and even neighborhood violence from anti-Semites, but they did not face organized and state-sponsored terror. They were not kept from voting. They could, and did, move into the middle and upper-middle class within a generation.

I do not have time or space to go into it here, but it has been well-documented that many of the governmental social programs of the first half of the 20th century either implicitly or explicitly excluded African-Americans. Almost no wealth has accumulated in the African-American community, because of these policies. Large numbers of Black people continue to be confined to increasingly segregated schools and neighborhoods, because of these policies. And because of a criminal justice system that in many ways has continued to do the work of Jim Crow, vast numbers of African Americans at any given time are incarcerated or suffering the effects of incarceration.

And I am affected by all of this. The sociologist Allen Johnson has written about the ways that those of us who are white participate, whether we know it or not, in a very unjust system. He writes: "I could say this history has nothing personally to do with me, that it was all a long time ago and done by someone else...But even if that is true, the only way to let it go at that is to ignore the fact that if someone was willing to take the time to follow the money, they would find that some portion of the house and land that we now call home can be traced directly back through my family history to the laws and practices that whites have collectively imposed through their government and other institutions. Back to the industrial revolution and the exploitation of people of color that made it possible." (quoted in *Original Sin*, page 87)

The benefits of America's foundational sins accrue to me, whether I want it to be that way or not. And I am affected, because policies that have at their roots the disenfranchisement of African Americans - for example, the electoral college, which gave southern slave owners the ability to count their slaves as partial human beings for the purposes of political representation, while counting them as property for everything else - those policies have eaten away at the foundations of our democracy. That affects me. I am affected because since the dawn of slavery in this country, poor white people have been pitted against people of color, and that dynamic has created a political culture where even the most basic

social safety net is suspect, where we cannot talk about health care or decent education as a human right. That affects me.

I am affected because, as James Baldwin wrote many years ago:

“What I’m...concerned about is what white Americans have done to themselves; what has been done to me is irrelevant simply because there is nothing more you can do to me. But in doing it, you’ve done something to yourself...In evading my humanity, you have done something to your own humanity.” (*The Cross of Redemption*, p. 61).

The sin of racism degrades my humanity, along with the humanity of everyone else who shares in it.

So. I have come out of my dwelling, and measured my relative distance to the crime. I have realized that a sin which might seem quite distant from me affects me, because it affects the society around me, because it degrades my relationship with God and with other people. So now what do I do? This brings me to:

Priestly concept #3: Whether a sin is conscious or inadvertent, it must be atoned for.

There is a curious concept in the Torah, the idea of sins committed *bish’gaga* - in error, or inadvertently. These errors can happen both in the realm of ritual or ethics. In Leviticus, we read about the possibility of one person, or a leader, or the entire community unintentionally violating a mitzvah, a covenantal commandment, and the steps they must take to rectify that error, once they realize it has occurred.

What is powerful to me is the idea that a sin is simply an action - something I did, or failed to do - that causes negative consequences. The person who sins, in these priestly texts, is not considered a bad person; in fact, the word “bad” or “evil” does not appear in any of the priestly discussions of sin. Everyone stumbles, everyone commits transgressions, according to this view - including the high priest himself.

Last month, following the events in Charlottesville, I heard a radio report from a Latina journalist who went to interview a member of the Ku Klux Klan. In the course of her conversation with this older white man, he remarked that he was not a racist.

This fascinated me. I wanted to ask him how exactly he defined what it means to be a racist, since I would have thought that being a member of the Ku Klux Klan sort of automatically put you into that category. The reporter did not ask him, so I will never know his answer. But his comment stayed with me. I began to wonder: what really is the difference between this KKK member, and liberal white people who get really upset if anyone suggests they might have said or done something racist? What is the difference between the KKK man and me?

The philosopher John Powell has made the very astute point that racism is a system of thought and behavior that changes and adapts over time - but we don’t realize it. We think

that racism today means what it meant during the era of Jim Crow. We understand it as “conscious discriminatory activity, directed at a particular victim, by racist individuals.” In this understanding, racism cannot occur without conscious intent and without “bad actors” carrying out the racist actions or policies. This is both how our legal system understands racism, and how individuals understand it. Because of this, Powell points out, “to call someone racist today is seen as incendiary and a form of character assassination.” (*Racing to Justice*, p. 5) This explains why Mr. KKK and people like me would get equally upset at being called “racist.” Because who likes to think of themselves as a consciously bad actor with evil intent?

But as the Bible says, sin does not require intention, and it certainly does not require bad actors. Racism today is hidden deep within our brains and baked into our social and political institutions in such a way that we don’t necessarily see it - especially if we are white. We imbibe racism from the day we are born. According to tests of implicit bias, most Americans - regardless of race - display a pro-white, anti-black bias. Racism persists despite the many victories of the civil rights movement, the legal battles won - even as some of those victories are threatened today. While blatant intentional racism still rears its ugly head, the deeper and broader structures that support it do not rely on evil intent or consciously bad actors.

The concept of “unintentional sin” is a helpful way for we who are white to begin dealing with the racism within and around us. As I thought about Mr. KKK, I realized that he is not the “other.” I cannot make him and white people like him into scapegoats who carry all the burden of the sin of racism. Mr. KKK is on one end of a continuum of racist thought and behavior, and I, hopefully, am a bit further down, towards the more aware side of that continuum. But we are both on the same continuum - because racism resides in our subconscious minds, and because, as white people, we enjoy the benefits of a system still organized along racial lines, whether those benefits are visible to us, or not.

According to the Torah, the only way to atone for a sin that is done *bishgaga*, unintentionally or inadvertently, is to come to “know” it. The priestly text uses the verb *yada*. This is a deep kind of knowing - a deep awareness of the truth.

To know the reality of racism, I have to really work to become less unaware. I have to admit, and even embrace, the reality that I have said stupid and hurtful things, usually out of ignorance. I need to confess that I have been relatively clueless about the reality of racism. To become more aware. I need to listen to the voices and read the works of people of color, and to learn the American history I never knew.

What would it mean for all of us, together, to “make known” the sin of slavery, the sin of racism that continues to plague our nation? What steps can each of us take to make it “known” to ourselves and those around us? I want to lift up here the work of our Understanding Racism group, a group of white congregants who have been educating themselves, and helping educate the rest of us, about the realities I am addressing today. This is holy work, according to the priests, this ‘making known.’

The last concept I'd like to explore with you today is the ritual that we read about this morning: making atonement, *kapparah*, for our collective sins. For the priests, both "atonement" and "forgiveness" - *kapparah* and *slikha* - worked in this way: the person who had sinned made a payment - usually an animal sacrifice - that mitigated the punishment they would have to face for their sin. The sacrificial animal - like the ones offered on Yom Kippur - functioned like modern-day fines. Today, for many crimes, the guilty person can pay a fine that lets them out of the harsher penalty of incarceration. The money is usually paid to society, representing the offended party. Because to the priests, God was one of the parties injured by sin, a payment was given to Adonai on the altar. This offering invoked God's forgiveness.

Now, the Bible understood that for crimes between people, justice had to be done for the person who was harmed. In the case of theft or deceit, stolen property had to be repaid plus a 20% fine. In the case of intentional murder, one had to pay with one's life. But the *kapparah*, the payment of a sacrifice, was brought to repair the damage that was done to the community as a whole, and to repair the spiritual damage done by the sin.

In thinking about slavery and its atonement, the *kapparah* - the forgiveness offering - is akin to the idea of our society paying reparations for the sin of slavery. Of course, the actual debt owed to both Native Americans and African-Americans can never be repaid. The crimes were too great, both in monetary and human terms, to ever be truly reconciled. But what might a mitigated penalty - a *kapparah* - look like? And how might such a payment help us, as Americans, repair the psychological and spiritual damage done?

In his 2014 article, "[The Case for Reparations](#)," Ta-nehisi Coates writes about a bill that has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives every year since 1989 by Congressman John Conyers. H.R. 40 would establish "a commission to study and develop reparation proposals for African-Americans, to examine slavery and discrimination in the colonies and the United States from 1619 to the present and recommend appropriate remedies." Representative Conyers introduced it again this past January. Out of 435 members of Congress, the bill has only 32 co-sponsors. As it has in every year since 1989, the bill is sitting in a subcommittee. We are so far from being willing to know this foundational part of our American history, we cannot even establish a commission to study and debate the question of what it might mean to address it. Coates writes in his article:

"No one can know what would come out of such a debate. Perhaps no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America. Perhaps the number is so large that it can't be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed. But I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future. More important than any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America's maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders."

The Torah gives us guidance in how to address our communal sins. We need, first, to become aware of them - to really know what has been done. We need to confess, to name aloud the sins that have been committed whose effects we still bear. We need to make some kind of restitution, *kapparah*, a mitigated penalty, to those who have been sinned against. And we need to make offerings to repair the relationships that have been damaged: our relationships with one another, the social structures that have been harmed, and ultimately, our relationship with God, with the Godliness that dwells within each and every one of us.

None of this is impossible. In fact, I would argue that we cannot save our democracy, heal our planet, and close the yawning gap between the rich and everyone else in this country if we don't do it.

For inspiration, I'd like to give the final word to two people whose lives exemplified this work of knowing and healing the wounds of slavery and racism. Here is James Baldwin again:

“Human freedom is a complex, difficult—and private—thing. If we can liken life, for a moment, to a furnace, then freedom is the fire which burns away illusion. Any honest examination of the national life proves how far we are from the standard of human freedom with which we began. The recovery of this standard demands of everyone who loves this country a hard look at himself, for the greatest achievements must begin somewhere, and they always begin with the person. If we are not capable of this examination, we may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failures in the history of nations.” (*Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 116)

Baldwin reminds me that repentance and atonement are done out of love, not out of hate. Our need to collectively atone for the sin of slavery, for the ongoing sins of racism, is not to tear down this country, but to love it better, to love it into its best self. It is holy work, as the Torah reminds us.

To do this work, we each need to make our own commitments, to examine our own hearts and to repair what we can in our own spaces. As the civil rights activist and historian, Vincent Harding, taught:

“Living in faith is knowing that even though our little work, our little seed, our little brick, our little block may not make the whole thing, the whole thing exists in the mind of God, and that whether or not we are there to see the whole thing is not the most important matter. The most important thing is whether we have entered into the process.” (quoted in *Original Sin*, p. 224)

As we enter into this new year, may we with love and care, with awareness and commitment, enter into the process of freedom, the process of atonement, the process of *tikkun*, repair. May we find strength with and from one another as we do this work, with open eyes and open hearts, for the sake of healing and wholeness. And when we stumble

and make mistakes along the way, which we will, may we be open to knowing it, and taking responsibility, and healing each other to make it right. May it be so.

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Yom Kippur 5778

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