

Sh'ma Yisrael – Why Can't We Listen?

Black Lives Matter and a People in Pain

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“I’m not White, I’m Jewish!” I said.

Now, I try not to live with a lot of regret in my life. I try to recognize that while I certainly make mistakes, a lot of them, that I generally am doing the best I can in the moment. Hopefully, I tell myself, I learn from my mistakes and I try not to repeat them. A good Yom Kippur message. But I regret that particular statement. I regret the insensitivity it showed, the naivety. I regret the inability to see the world through another person’s eyes. I have tried to learn from that mistake. But I wish I could take the words back. I wish I had listened more and talked less. I hope I have learned that much. I need to listen better. We all need to listen better.

It was November of 1992. I was in my 4th year of Rabbinic school in New York City. A group of us were selected to fly down and spend a few days with students of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. ITC is a consortium of six predominantly African-American Christian seminaries on one campus. It is a remarkable institution, breaking down some of the denominational barriers that traditionally separate Christian groups. We were there to study together and share our perspectives. They loved our fluency with Hebrew, something they were working hard at. We loved the way the schools put preaching at the center. Man, could they preach! They had first year seminarians witnessing the word so powerfully, we advanced students – almost ready to be ordained as rabbis – were ready to crawl into a corner and never say a word in public again. Obviously, that didn’t last.

But the studying and preaching were a prelude to what we were really doing there. We were there to talk. To listen. To see the world from another perspective. That was much harder.

Now, I am a child of the Civil Rights Movement. I grew up with “Black is Beautiful” and Black empowerment. My father, of blessed memory, was a well known rabbi-activist in Houston, and visited Dr. King in jail. My father was chastised by his congregation’s leadership for speaking out too much and by the KKK for – actually, the same reason. Only one of them threatened to bomb our home. I marched as a child and was fed on the obvious reality that we are all equal under

the skin and in the sight of G-d. And so I felt, some 20 years later, that I had solid credibility. That I was approaching these Black Seminarians in Atlanta as partners in the cause.

So I was shocked when we came down to the serious group conversation about Race in America, when the room became suddenly divided into “us” and “them.” When we were talking about institutionalized racism and the pain of growing up Black in America – and instead of being in a place of unity, I was put on the side of the oppressors. “But. . .I’m not White,” I said. “I’m Jewish!” It was said sincerely, if naively. In all honesty, I had never really thought of myself as White. On those required surveys where you had to color in the bubble next to “Race” I always selected “Other.” Mostly because there was never a line for who I was. I knew Judaism was not a religion, or not solely religion. It is my ethnicity, my identity, my peoplehood. “White” was “them”, those other people. The ones who wanted to see my father dead.

But that was not how my new friends saw me.

No, they told me as the anger rose. You are White. You can’t hide it. You can’t pretend. You might not think of yourself as White – but everyone else does. And you enjoy the privileges of that reality. No, they explained as if to a thoughtless child, you don’t get to have the benefits and then deny the reality. You are White.

Then we all went out to see the newly opened Spike Lee film about Malcom X.

It was a sobering experience that keeps me humble to this day. I had known Anti-Semitism in my youth. I knew childish taunts, pennies thrown in front of me to see if I would bend down and scoop them up. “Kike” was not an unusual term thrown at me, and “Jewing Someone Down” was not an unusual casual phrase. And I grew up only one generation removed from the Holocaust, the freest expression of institutionalized Anti-Semitism since the Middle Ages and with the most devastating of outcomes. I thought I understood what it means to be the “Other.” And I do. But I also know that I *choose* to project my Jewish identity. I don’t believe I ever would, but I can choose to remove my kippah. That power is in my hands. I wear it proudly because I want everyone – even those who might hate me – to know that I am a Jew. But that is my decision. That choice is not available for my African-American friends. I can hide.

I carry a burden of guilt for that day because I chose to speak before I listened. And I carry a burden of shame because I live in a society in which I can take advantage of White privilege without ever bothering to be aware of it. That movement shifted in me an awareness of who I am and what I take for granted.

And I stand today in disbelief at how little has changed.

Today, in this moment, as we have celebrated the beginning of the Jewish year 5777, having past the mid-point of the first decade of the 21st Century, cities across America stand on the brink of race-riots such as we haven't seen since the late 1960's. It is as if nothing has changed. Even the election of an African-American President has not shifted the harsh realities as we had wished. There is a persistent and real anger at a Justice system that is seen as inherently racist. 12-13% of the American population is African-American, but they make up 35% of the prison population. Before it was declared unconstitutional, 80% of those subjected to New York's "Stop and Frisk" policy were Black or Latino. We see Inner cities neglected from the effects of White Flight. There is pain and loss at neighborhoods lost to gentrification all over the country, including here in Portland. We see it, perhaps. We talk. But we don't listen.

Sh'ma Yisrael, we Jews say as a central component of each prayer service. "Listen, Oh Israel." G-d is One, one unifier of all humanity. But we don't listen. We too readily accept a world of "us" and "them" – especially when we benefit from it. Or, at the very least, when we don't have to suffer from the indignities of those who are identified as "Other."

We Jews have been that "other" – but that is only meaningful if it sensitizes us to its reality.

These past few years, I have had the opportunity to listen, to hear that pain. I have been trying not to speak – which is very hard for me. I have shared with you some of what I have heard. A religious leader in the African-American community who wouldn't dare get into his car without being absolutely certain he had his driver's license – for fear of being accused of stealing the vehicle. A stunning and successful physician who always leaves extra time in her travels, knowing she is likely to be stopped for "Driving While Black." Grandmothers who take on the responsibility of having "The Talk" with their young grandsons about how to behave when approached by police – how to appear non-threatening so they are not killed. This is real. This is local. All you have to do is listen. *Sh'ma Yisrael*.

And I have listened to my friends on the police force, good men and women who hate these characterizations, who know that a few bad cops taint the image of the thousands who are respectful and dignified and committed to the equal protection of all. I hear the pain when they are seen as a target for putting on the uniform. That reality cannot be denied, especially after the terror in Dallas this summer – the horrific murder of 5 police officers protecting a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest.

And neither can the reality of case after case, capturing national attention, of Black men being gunned down by police. Black people whose safety after arrest is disregarded, or who receive no medical attention after a violent encounter. If you haven't seen the chilling videos from the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, for example, you should. It is hard not to listen after experiencing it. But this is only one example. No one case defines the reality. We are

seeing an overwhelming barrage, an indictment of a system which has only been given a name and a cause because of the reality of ever-present video cameras and social media platforms to distribute them. The injustice is not anything new. It is just the fact that we can see it played out in moments of terror. And now the movement calling out this reality has been given a name: Black Lives Matter.

Now, I know that when I use the movement name “Black Lives Matter” it causes strong reactions. For some, like me, there is a response of pain for a parent organization which has rejected Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state. It hurts me and I want my friends to listen to my pain. But it does not keep me from being an ally. For some of us “Black Lives Matter” evokes an instant response: “all lives matter.” While that is an undeniable reality, “Black Lives Matter” as a movement and slogan is saying something else - and we need to listen with a still and open heart. The statement is “Black Lives Matter, too.” In a society of equal justice for all it shouldn’t need to be said. Which is why it needs to be said. When it seems that some lives matter more than others, we are hearing a cry – “we are here. We are worthwhile. Our lives have meaning. Our deaths have meaning.” Black Lives Matter.

The other day, I happened to be caught on the receiving end of a protest organized by “Don’t Shoot, PDX” shouting Black Lives Matter slogans. I was at a meeting held in the Mayor’s office – a meeting on Police Reform, as it happens – when 50 or so protesters burst into City Hall and demanded entry to the Mayor’s suite. I heard the chants, I saw the frustration and anger – interestingly from a mostly young and white crowd. In circumstances I could imagine, I would have been the older White Jewish guy chanting along with them. But I could feel the palpable fear in my own heart of being among those facing the crowd. Which side am I on?

Because the truth is, I have to look within. We all do. The other day my daughter asked me if, growing up in Texas, I had some inherent racism in me. Of course I do. I grew up in a world where the stratification of privilege was clear. And I was a Straight White Male. Ok, I was a child. But I knew, without it being articulated, that my inheritance was the top of the pyramid. I learned not to believe this, not to act on it, in fact to fight loudly for the equality I truly and deeply believe in. But I have to accept the duality within me, for to deny it would be to deny that America today is still racist. And that painful reality is playing itself out on the streets of our cities.

Scientists have a term for this, a human tendency now even recognized by the Supreme Court of the United States¹, which can cause us to make unconscious assumptions about others. It is

¹ *Texas Department of Housing v. The Inclusive Communities Project* (see Supreme Court Breakfast Table: The Court Acknowledges ‘Unconscious Prejudice’. Slate. Kenji Yoshino, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_breakfast_table/features/2015/scotus_roundup/supreme_court_2015_the_court_acknowledges_unconscious_prejudice.html)

called “Implicit Bias” defined as “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. . . everyone is susceptible.”²

Sh'ma Yisrael. We are implored to listen. To suspend our judgment for a time. This political season, like the Presidential election season of 1968, has seen some of the worst impulses around race articulated in horrifying ways. Not since the 3rd Party candidacy of former Alabama Governor George Wallace has White Privilege been given such a platform. Whether intentional or not, race and racism are today part of our national debate. In some ways this conversation is powerful, evocative and uplifting – as exemplified by the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. In some ways it is angry and frustrating. We need to listen and we need to learn. We have implicit bias. And we need to search ourselves.

One of the challenges presented to us, as rabbinic students 24 years ago, was to search our own Jewish texts. Until that day, I had never heard about the “Sons of Ham” – a powerful image from the Torah which resonates negatively in the Black community. Ham, the son of Noah, was cursed by G-d. His name means “hot” or “burnt” and the Torah later lists him as the father of Cush – otherwise known as Ethiopia. Cush is the biblical Black man. To be sure, I had heard of Noah’s sons – I had read the text. I just had not paid attention to what was right in front of me. I had never listened to how these words might be heard. After being challenged, I read deeper into Jewish literature and found the ways that “Cush” was used as a derogatory term for Blacks throughout Jewish history. That prejudice, like misogyny, is built into our Jewish texts. We have to face it. *Sh'ma Yisrael*, we have to listen to the pain without judgment or apology. But we don’t have to stay there. We have to acknowledge our unconscious biases, but we don’t have to act on them. We have to work to reform the institutionalized racism in our society, a system of justice which works for some, but not equally for all. Listening should lead us to action. We have the right and the responsibility to be allies. To right the wrongs. To help fix what is broken. For in G-d’s vision there is no “us” and “them.” We are not unique and beloved above all else. We are not chosen to be separated. For the prophet says:

הָלוֹא כְּבָנֵי כְּשִׂיִם אַתֶּם לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נְאֻם־יְהוָה

*To me, Oh Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians – declares the Lord.*³

To G-d, we are all the same. To G-d we all deserve dignity and justice. Just as we stand against Anti-Semitism, we stand against Racism. This is Yom Kippur – a time to reflect with honesty about ourselves. It is a time when we acknowledge that we can change. We are not asked to change our internal bias, but we can change our words and our actions. We have to begin by

² Staats, Capatosot, Wright, Jackson “State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review, 2016 Edition,” Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, The Ohio State University, <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/implicit-bias-2016.pdf>, p. 14.

³ Amos 9:7

acknowledging what we have done wrong. Many years ago, I spoke without listening. I allowed my implicit bias, which we all share, to speak without malice but also without sensitivity. We can all do better. We have to do better. So let us listen before judging. Let us stand with those oppressed. Sh'ma Yisrael. Let us have the humility to listen. Let us have the courage to act. Let us partner with those demanding justice. A justice equal for all. It may involve challenging and changing ourselves. It may involve challenging and changing our institutions. But we can do it. We can be a partner for justice. For justice is what we all deserve. Let us start by listening. Sh'ma Yisrael.