

Kol Nidre 2020 ~ Hineni: Showing Up to the Work of Anti-Racism
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In January I travelled with Truah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights to Montgomery, Alabama to explore the Equal Justice Initiative's Museum and Memorial. Located on the site of a former warehouse where Black people were enslaved, the Legacy museum immerses visitors in the sights and sounds of the domestic slave trade, racial terrorism, the Jim Crow South, and the US prison system.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice acknowledges the more than 4400 African American men, women, and children who were lynched and murdered by white mobs between 1877-1950. 805 steel markers hanging from the ceiling inscribed with names and counties where the brutality took place.¹

As you descend the ramps of the memorial, the hanging markers rise above you, and you have no choice but to lift your gaze and realize you are witness to a mass lynching.

It was a searing experience.

We were a group of about 50 rabbis and Jewish leaders, eager to learn what the museum and memorial have to teach us about America's history of racial oppression and our duty as moral leaders in the light of these injustices. One of the attorneys at EJI shared what motivated her to want to help overturn wrongful convictions. She said as a black woman, it was her "proximity to slavery" that made her passionate.

It was the first time I had ever understood the word "proximate" in this context. I had always thought that the history of slavery to Black people was like the history of the Holocaust to Jews. Even if my/our grandparents didn't perish in the holocaust, we feel the generational trauma that the Nazis inflicted on the world. We say every Passover: "In every generation, we must see ourselves as if we had been liberated from Egypt."

¹ <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/>

But this trip opened my eyes to a completely new understanding. It is actually *not* the same.

Seeing ourselves as if is not the same as *how we are seen* by others, and I newly understood that no matter how many generations have passed, or whether a black person knows the ancestor who was brought to America on a slave ship in 1619, did not matter.

As my colleague Rabbi Amy Eilberg reflected: “It was genocide on an enormous scale. 12 million Africans were kidnapped and forced into chattel slavery. Two million died in the Middle Passage. One million blacks were forcibly moved from the upper South and Northeast to support the slave-based economy in the Deep South. Many thousands were lynched in public squares, in supposed retaliation for trivial and imagined offenses against the superiority of white people, as townspeople cheered. These massive brutalities have not been acknowledged or atoned for. They have not even ended. They have merely evolved into new forms.”²

Coming home from Montgomery, I understood that the experience of slavery, is lived every day in Black bodies. I wanted to call up every Black person I knew and apologize. I felt shame rise within me. How did I not know or understand this before now? How did I, a nice, white, Jewish woman from a good, liberal family, who cared about the world, not appreciate this before now?

It was an intensely painful recognition, because I for the first time I understood *privilege* as something you actually cannot *see* yourself. I had to recognize anew that how the external world *sees you* is where the problem of racism begins. This is true for the person of color who experiences it *and* for the average white passing person like me who doesn't.

I realized that privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it is not a problem *for you*. You can believe racism is a problem, but privilege comes in *not having to live it every day*.

² <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/reeling>

I had to admit that I had benefitted from a system that would always see me as white, whether I experienced that or not.

Bryan Stevenson, the founder and exec director of EJI, an attorney and the author of acclaimed book *Just Mercy*, teaches that “You cannot change what you cannot see.” He meant that in order to address poverty and oppression you have to “get proximate” and draw closer to it. This work is not just between individuals but I see it as a clarion call to *teshuvah bein adam l’makom* – repentance for societal ills – the kind of work for which Yom Yippur atones.

When we come close and allow ourselves to see and be touched by experiences, narratives, and people around us, it becomes hard to look away. And in coming close, we, as Stevenson says, “find the power to change the world.”

The first two questions of the Torah are: *ayekah* – *where are you* – that God is imagined to ask Adam after he ate from the Tree of Knowledge; and *ai achicha* – *where is your brother* – asked of Cain after he killed his brother Abel.

Both of those questions were answered in the moment, but neither were answers of accountability, responsibility, or intention. Adam *hid* from God and Cain asked *How should he know?*

There is, however, a very different response found in the Torah of readiness and attention. It is the response of *hineni* – *I am here*. This was the response of our ancestors when they heard a voice calling them to be present like never before.

Abraham said it twice, both in the text of the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac, when God instructs him to take his son Isaac up the mountain as an *olah* – an offering. And Isaac responds with the same answer.

Esau said it once when Isaac called him to be blessed, (Gen. 27:1)

Jacob said it twice, the first in a dream to an angel of God, (Gen. 31:11) the second in a vision before bringing the family to Egypt to be reunited with Joseph (Gen. 46:2).

Moses said it when God called to him from the burning bush. (Ex. 3:4)

And finally, Samuel said it when he was called to fulfill the vow made by his mother Hannah to serve in the Temple. (I Sam. 3:4)

So they were each called twice by name, calling the person first to *attention*, and second to *intention*.

So here I am. *Hineni*. Tonight, on the holiest of nights I want to transform my shame and guilt into truth telling and transformation.

I didn't grow up with any friends who were black. I went to a Jewish Day School and I'm pretty sure there were no bi-racial Jews or Jews of Color in my immediate circle of relationships or family friends. In college, my primary relationships were with white people, Jews or non-Jews, and though I became a vocal feminist and spoke out on behalf of all women, something didn't translate into my relationships when it came to people of color. Though I'm sure I fancied myself as the 1990s version of being "woke."

My time at the Religious Action Center in DC – the political and legislative arm of the Reform movement was life changing as I confronted all of the various legislative imperatives to transform the world, alongside the giants of Jewish social justice activism like Al Vorspan z"l, Rabbi David Saperstein, Lynne Landsberg z"l, and Sharon Kleinbaum. But my own personal world remained small when it came to racial diversity.

In rabbinical school my world shrunk further. Rabbis, rabbinical students, Jewish professionals, and still very few, if any, Jews of color or biracial Jews in those circles.

I tell you all of this because it cast a silent complicity over my life and over the now two decades in the rabbinate, even while I am engaged now in multi-faith justice work.

But something Stevenson said about the work of criminal justice reform in *Just Mercy*, has stayed with me – he said, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done.”³

And while he was talking primarily about incarcerated individuals and anyone who has done wrong, for tonight I count myself too. We prayed earlier tonight – *by the authority of the heavenly court and the authority of the earthly realm we ask permission to be able to pray together with the avaryanim – all of the sinners.*

So that’s the invitation of tonight – to practice being better humans, together, realizing we are not the worst we have ever done, but still showing up, to seek redemption, forgiveness, and atonement. These are not just good ideas; they are necessary practices for society to function.

When George Floyd was murdered, I couldn’t watch the 9:46 minute video. I couldn’t watch it because it felt voyeuristic, and I didn’t want to watch a man die such a brutal death – I never like to watch violence.

It was another horrific viral video of Black people being attacked or killed for living while Black, which I never wanted to watch. I definitely could not watch the 2:53 minutes when George Floyd stopped breathing, the officer’s knee still on his neck.

In the weeks that followed, I was a part of several conversations with multi-faith clergy. At one point – a Black minister said, “Listen up. We are tired. We cannot take the lead here, we are tired, and we need you, white clergy to step into the fray.” And that was when I watched the video in its entirety.

At the next meeting, the moderator began by asking Black clergy to speak first to share their feelings and experiences, and only then would the white clergy have a turn. It was a small but mighty gesture.

I then decided to sign on to a national declaration with Faith in Action⁴ written **BY** white clergy, **FOR** white clergy to declare atonement for our personal acts of

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice/transcript?language=en

⁴ <https://faithinaction.org/tool-resource/white-faith-leader-formation-series/>

racism, our failure to hear the cries of our kindred our silence in the face of racial injustice.

We affirmed the need to build redemptive power with our colleagues of color to bring systemic and structural change to our nation, we committed to bring our prophetic voices into the public arena and to leading our congregations to confront our racism and anti-blackness.

At first, among a few Jewish colleagues there was some hesitation because they grew up never thinking of themselves as white, because we were always seen as Jewish, by the same hegemonic white supremacist ideology that discriminated against Black and Brown people.

But In the words of the Prophet Jeremiah, *“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, Peace’ when there is no peace”* (6:14). I was determined to step up, show, up and say, *hineni*.

And then I did something I never did before. I reached out to my circle of black friends and colleagues and said, “I can only imagine what you are feeling in these days after George Floyd’s murder, and I just want to tell you I see you, I’m horrified and heartbroken, and I’m here.”

Why had I never done that before? George Floyd was certainly *not* the first unarmed black man killed by police, but something shifted in me as Ahmaud Aubrey was killed in February, Breonna Taylor in March, and Then George Floyd in May, that the emotional barrier I had unconsciously erected gave way, and I simply had to reach out.

Our tradition teaches that humanity began with a single human being, so that no one could say, “My ancestor is greater than yours.” It teaches that when G-d gathered up earth to make that first human being, G-d gathered soil from the four corners of the earth- yellow clay and white sand, black loam and red soil, to teach us that we are created as equals, equal in our humanity, in our dignity, and in our divinity.⁵ If we are all of inherent worth we all merit a world that is not based on theft, slavery, or violence, but on justice, mercy, and love.

⁵ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yalkut Shimoni

In a recent podcast with Dr. Brene Brown, a research professor who has focused on courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy for years, she focused on the importance of anti-racism work in this moment.

I felt like she was speaking right to me when she said: “We’re trying to do anti-racism work, some of us have been doing it for a while, some of us are brand new to it. *We need to understand the difference between being held accountable for racism and experiencing shame as a result of that accountability, and how that’s different than actually being shamed for being a racist.* These are different things.”⁶

The High Holy liturgy makes reference to this feeling of brokenness and paralyzing shame. The phrase *busha u’chlimah* appears in the Amidah a number of times: “*Here I am like a vessel filled with shame.*”

But such a feeling is hopeless and unhelpful if we do nothing with it. Brown teaches that we are “hard wired for connection, love and belonging,” and shame just *isn’t* a social justice tool.

So, I had to shift my thinking that “*I was bad* for not understanding the proximity of slavery and brokenness in the Black experience” to remembering the teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that “some are guilty, but all are responsible,” because until one’s shame is able to be transformed into responsibility, nothing will change.

In the Tony award winning musical, *Avenue Q*, two characters Princeton and Kate Monster share a duet called, *Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist*. They sing: “*Everyone's a little bit racist, sometimes/ Doesn't mean we go around committing hate crimes/Look around and You will find / No one's really Color-blind/ Maybe it's a fact we all should face /Everyone makes Judgments...based on race.*”⁷

The edgy musical struck a chord when it first played on Broadway because it called people in to Real, unfiltered conversations about life.

⁶ <https://brenebrown.com/transcript/brene-on-shame-and-accountability/>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RovF1zsDoeM>, lyrics by Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx

If we're all racist, it's because we are bombarded with messages from the day we were born, so, when we're held accountable for racism and someone points out or holds us accountable for what we say or what we do, and we feel shame, that's not the same as being shamed for *being* a racist.

In June, it became clear to me that I did not know what *Juneteeth* was, the holiday that has been celebrated in the Black community since 1866 marking the end of slavery. I emailed a black colleague and gushed: "I want to do a Juneteenth Kabbalat Shabbat, and can you tell me everything I need to know to do it?"

When we got on the phone to talk, Jordan gently but firmly pushed me to recognize that I was about to celebrate a holiday that I didn't see as mine, but that I "should" do something about. When he pointed out that incorporating elements into the service as a process of education and awareness might be a better approach at first, I realized that my goal would be that a year from now, I wanted this community to be recognized as a place to mark this important commemoration within a Jewish context, in a non-appropriative or exploitative way.

Vulnerability takes emotional risk, exposure, and uncertainty. But Brown teaches that it is also our most accurate measurement of courage, the birthplace of creativity, innovation and change.

The ability we have to hold something we've done against who we want to be in incredibly adaptive. It's uncomfortable but its adaptive. Empathy is the antidote to shame. "*We are good, we are flawed, we are the breath of an imperfect God,*" sings musician, Batya Levine,⁸ a song I've been listening to on repeat for the last month.

It is this core belief in forgiveness, in the process of taking responsibility, for what we've done wrong and apologizing for it, for offering restitution, and for building new systems and structures, that ultimately enable healthy and loving behavior and communities to flourish.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAABpxPU8sg>

The moral leadership called for at this moment isn't one that dismisses the pain of fellow human beings or waves a bible while waging war on the most vulnerable. Each of us can be part of a process that invites the vulnerability and courage to say *hineni* – I am here for the dismantling of systemic racism and the building of relationships.

I invite you to stand with me to practice the work of atonement and forgiveness, so that we and our world might heal and know justice.

Gmar Hatima Tova – May our individual teshuvah lead to collective transformation.