

Rosh Hashana Dvar Torah
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A story in Vayikra Rabba tells of Hillel the Elder, sage and forerunner of rabbinic Judaism, departing from his students.

They asked him, “Rabbi, where are you going?”

“I’m going to do a mitzvah.” He said.

“Which mitzvah?” They asked.

“To bathe in the bathhouse.” Hillel responded.

“*This* is a mitzvah?!” His students exclaimed.

Hillel replied with a parable, about the Roman empire in which they lived: In the empire, a man was appointed to take care of the statues of the king. This man was a very important public official, and his job was to scour and rinse and cleanse these statues made in the king’s image.

Then Hillel posed a question to his students: Our creation story teaches us that we are made in the image of God, *btzelem elokim*. If it is of such importance that the statues made in the king’s image be cleansed, rinsed and cared for, what about us? We are the image of God in the world, is it not our obligation to care for our own bodies?

In Hillel’s worldview, it isn’t just an *inner* spark within each of our souls that is divine. For Hillel, one’s *entire body* is divine.

Every
body

deserves to go to the bathhouse.

In fact, every body is *obligated* to go to the bathhouse.

It is a mitzvah, a commandment, to care for ourselves because each of our bodies is the image of God.

I love this story, because I find it deeply dignifying. It helps me remind myself that when I care for myself, when I respect and nurture myself, even, especially, my corporeal self, I am performing an act of reverence for God.

If we take Hillel’s worldview seriously, actually noticing that our own bodies are divine, how might we relate differently to ourselves?

For me, Hillel’s lesson also comes to bear when I look around at the world. If my own body is divine, then everyone else’s body is also divine, also a mirror of our Maker.

"וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ"

Vayivra elokim et ha'adam b'tzalmo, b'tzelem elokim bara oto.

“And God created the human being in God’s own image, in the image of God, God created the human.” These are the words of the first chapter of the Torah, reminding us of our own holy human bodies.

And yet, when I look around, I don’t see a world full of bodies at the bathhouse. When I look, I see a world of divine bodies in distress, divine bodies that struggle to survive, to earn a living wage, to access adequate housing, education, healthcare and other basic needs. We know that in the United States, these inequalities are not consistent- that they are disproportionately the burden of communities of color. Thanks to the past year of action around racial inequality, it is becoming harder for the American mainstream not to see this reality, not to see a country full of divine bodies in distress.

Because this is the charge of the moment, and in many ways the charge of the past year, I want to talk specifically about anti-black racism, and the brutalizing of black lives in this country.

The reports of police brutality against black women, men, and children, have gained increasing visibility in the media.

Over the past year we have witnessed the birth of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which has brought thousands into the streets, responding to the deaths of victims such as Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and Rekia Boyd, at the hands of racist policing.

This past summer, president Obama visited a federal prison, drawing attention to the crisis of mass incarceration and the need for reforms to the dehumanizing criminal justice system that disproportionately targets black communities.

I want to say explicitly that as someone raised white, I do not feel that I have yet learned the proper or most productive tools for addressing racism. But religious communities have been invited and challenged by the movement to think together about the reality of racism in our country and society, and so I ask you to join me in thinking about this issue from a Jewish perspective.

For the past year, the Black Lives Matter movement has been drawing attention nationwide to the fact that black people are routinely profiled and brutalized.

That black bodies are targeted both by police forces and civilians, are beaten, incarcerated and tortured in prisons, are killed.

On the BlackLivesMatter website one can find the following statistics:

Every 28 hours a black man, woman, or child is murdered by police or vigilante law enforcement. 5.1% of black American women live in poverty, which is a higher number

than any other ethnic group. The average life expectancy for a black transgender woman is 35 years.¹

As I listen to these numbers I feel overwhelmed, horrified, and numb, all at once. I wonder how you feel. Take a moment to feel this information move through your own body, and notice where there might be tightness, anger, resistance, grief, or other emotions.

The messaging of “Black Lives Matter”, which has caught on as the name and the rallying cry for this movement, is that black lives are not expendable, because God is not expendable.

Because, as Hillel taught, each human body and life is a reflection of the divine, an *expression* of the divine. The targeting and brutalization of black lives is the targeting and brutalization of God’s body.

And if God’s body is being brutalized, *everyone’s* body is being brutalized.

* * *

Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, writes about denial: “Denial”, she says, “is facilitated by persistent racial segregation in housing and schools, by political demagoguery, by racialized media imagery, and by the ease of changing one’s perception of reality simply by changing television channels...”²

When we don’t have to see the way others suffer, we don’t have to confront our own denial or be stirred into empathy. If we don’t see others in their suffering, we do not have to feel implicated in our own bodies and souls. Looking away, or changing the television channel, as Alexander writes, is a choice that some of us get to make.

Yet in our multicultural and multiracial Jewish communities, we cannot separate ourselves from racial violence. Some of us in this room are direct targets of racism, and some of us are not. But when we come to synagogue seeking change, and prayer, and to begin the year together, we become mutually responsible for one another, and racial violence becomes all of our problem, on a personal level.

Ashamnu, we say, we have trespassed.

¹ BlackLivesMatter.com

² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*

Bagadnu – we have dealt treacherously.
Gazalnu – we have robbed.

The words come from our machzor, from the *Vidui*, a series of confessional prayers we recite during the high holy days.

Whether or not I myself have trespassed or robbed, I come to shul, I open my machzor, and I acknowledge this act as my own.

In the days of awe, we are instructed to take a full account of all the transgressions we've committed over the past year. We repent as a way to return to God and to ourselves, as a way to enter the year with renewed commitments to our obligations and values.

The Vidui opens with the word *anu*.
Anu azey fanim, the first line reads: We are strong-willed.
Anu kasha orech, anu m'le'eh avon.
We are stubborn, we are sinful.
We.

Every prayer recited in the vidui is written in this plural collective *we*.

Al chet shechatanu lifanecha bchozek yad, bzilzul horim u morim,
bmasah u'v'matan:
for the sins *we* have committed before you by resorting to violence,
by scorning parents and teachers, by doing business immorally.

Without even knowing if *anyone* in the room has scorned parents or teachers, or done business immorally, we take collective responsibility. By coming to shul, standing in a community, and reciting the vidui.
By saying *we*.

It is deeply countercultural to claim this *we*, particularly in our broader American society that teaches us the highest value is the success of the *I*, of the individual.

This past summer, black writer John Metta wrote about the *I* and the *we*.
In a sermon delivered to his UCC church, Metta addressed white silence in response to the ongoing oppression of black people. He wrote:

“White people do not think in terms of *we*. White people have the privilege to interact with the social and political structures of our society *as individuals*. You are “you,” I am “one of them.” Whites are often not directly affected by racial oppression even in their own community, so what does not affect them locally has little chance of affecting them

regionally or nationally. They have no need, nor often any real desire, to think in terms of a group. They are supported by the system, and so are mostly unaffected by it.”³

Metta wrote these words after nine black worshippers were killed by a white supremacist in the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, and as eight historically black churches were burned in racist acts of arson. This summer, the sacred institution of the black church was under attack, and Metta’s words were a critique of the ability white members of our society have to turn away, the choice some of us make to not feel impacted, materially, emotionally or spiritually, by racial violence.

“You are *you*,” he wrote, and “I am “one of *them*.”

The work we do on our collective consciousness during the days of awe is crucial to combatting the individualism that Metta critiques.

It is an important challenge offered by Jewish tradition.

The stakes are high for the way we use these small seemingly inconsequential words, these tiny object pronouns:

I, you, them, we.

Ani, ata, hem, anu.

The stakes are human lives, and the lives of whole communities.

If we deny the way we are divinely interconnected to one another, through our shared reflection of God’s image, we run the risk that Michelle Alexander and John Metta warn against. We run the risk of *being able to look away*, of falsely perceiving that we have a choice in the matter, of thinking it’s not about us.

* * *

This past summer, I sat on a stoop in the heat of July, dialed a number into my phone, and heard voices on the other end.

These were the voices of over *four hundred* white religious leaders from all over the United States.

On the conference call, these clergy shared information about the black churches that had been burned in the South, coming together through an organization for white allies, called Showing Up For Racial Justice.

A woman named Jackie Dupont Walker, speaking on behalf of the African Methodist Episcopal church, told the hundreds of white clergy on the phone: “It is now on our watch.”

She encouraged us to join rapid response networks defending churches under attack, to raise funds for rebuilding the torched churches, to teach and preach on racism in our congregations, and support our communities to be in dialogue around racial violence and white supremacy.

³ John Metta, *I, Racist*.

As I sat on the phone, I wondered about the white pastors, rabbis and chaplains on the call. I wondered what compelled each of them to pick up the phone that day.

What compels anyone who is not a direct target of racial violence to feel that they have no choice in joining with those who are?

I wondered about how we develop this robust *we* of a movement, the *we* that gets people out in the street together, the *we* of signatures and petitions, of lobbying and vigils and trainings, the *we* of letters to the editor, and the raising of funds.

I know that some of the clergy got off of that call and returned to communities they serve where congregants are resistant to discussions about inequality. Perhaps the task that lay ahead for some of these clergy was the task of trying to *convince* their congregations to take a long hard look at the legacy of racism in our country.

I am so grateful that at Nehar Shalom, we are not at the beginning of this conversation.

Through our work with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, through our partnerships with the Jamaica Plain Interfaith Clergy Group, the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center and the wider Muslim community, we work in collaboration with other religious groups on a wide range of initiatives, including health care reform, affordable housing, addressing mass incarceration, and homelessness. Many of our members are deeply committed to interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue.

In our own personal and professional lives, we are a community of activists, educators, social workers, healthcare providers, of journalists and rabbinical students, of parents, neighbors, caretakers and friends, and so many other roles that facilitate the healing of a society broken by structural racism, and economic inequality.

So I don't come before all of you today to *convince* you of the need to see racial injustice for the first time. I don't come before you pleading that you feel implicated.

Rather, I come seeking *heshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our souls, which we are called upon to do during the days of awe.

As we review the past year, we can see **how urgent** the call for racial justice has been, and **how active** the response.

What do we need this year, in our community, in order to feel motivated to continue our racial justice work,

or in order to feel brave and invested enough to join the movement, or in order to recognize and celebrate the work we've been doing?

What do we need to account for, as we return to God and to ourselves, as we enter the year with renewed commitments to our obligations and values?

What do each of us need, in order to lean more fully into the *we*?

I invite each of you to consider this question, and to take it with you into the Days of Awe.

Take a couple minutes now, and turn to one to two people near you. Share with them your thoughts on the question. What do each of us need in order to lean more fully into the *we*?

(people turn to one another to share for a few minutes)

Thank you all so much for sharing your thoughts with each other. I hope that we can continue to be a source of reflection and accountability to one another throughout the year.

It's far less complicated to live our lives alone, rather than take on the messy challenge of interdependence, as anyone in this room who has parented a child, or cared for a family member or friend in a hard time can attest to.

But our liturgy insists
that we are *not* alone.

The Yamim Noraim are the days in which we let the boundary blur between ourselves and others. We're here praying for our lives, for the sustenance of our bodies, for all bodies. The Book Of Life is open, and we pray to live, to live into this next year with as much integrity and health and wholeness as possible.

On these critically important days, in which we are suspended between life and death, the stakes are too high for us to be mere individuals.

On some level, *we are one another*. Interwoven, interconnected, we are one shimmering body of humanity, reflecting all together the image of God.

Black scholar John Powell writes "our connection to others is already real, but we must claim it."

Our machzor says

*v'yerasu chulam agudah achat, laasot ratzoncha b'levav shalem*⁴

May all people be bound together, carrying out God's will as one whole heart.

I offer a prayer, to the Source of All Life,
that these days of awe bind us together, that they allow us to see in each other the sanctity of Your image.

May our repentance and prayer dissolve the boundaries
between the I and the we,

⁴ Rosh Hashana Amidah, p. 87 Lev Shalem

between our inner lives and the world around us,
between those inside of prisons, and those on the outside,
between those who are targeted by racial violence, and those who are safe from it.
Eternal One, strengthen our commitments to equality and justice,
and write us into the Book of Life, uplifting the value of life for all,
free, safe, dignified and whole,
each of us affirming together the image of God in our world.
And let us say, amen.