

Dear Chavraya,

I offer a brief introduction now to a statement of the Mass Board of Rabbis that will be released essentially in its present form early in the coming week. Having put a great deal of time into its preparation, I share it as Torah that emerges from the shattering pain of this time. At times I struggle with what it means to offer another statement, to raise up more words, even as there comes an acknowledgement at the end of the statement that “there are times when words no longer suffice, when words are hollow if they are not joined with deeds.” It is my hope that for all of the statements offered in recent days in response to the killing of George Floyd, each one will help to raise up one more fallen spirit, to lift up one more voice, to be as a hand to help draw another on along the path to justice. That is what this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Naso*, is about, raising up, lifting up, insuring that each one counts. It is a technical term for a census, *naso et rosh/lift up the head*, in the way that we might speak of counting heads.

More than a technical term, Naso represents a way of leadership, of being in relationship, each one as a leader. In one of the Torah’s most sublime and hidden teachings of humility and decency, at the time of the dedication of the *Mishkan* that takes place in this portion, each of the *n’si’im/princes* of Israel brings exactly the same gift for the sanctuary. In what is at first one of the most boring and uninspiring sections of Torah, the very same details, down to their smallest, is repeated twelve times, only the name of each tribal prince changing. Not wishing to outshine or in any way embarrass another, each *nasi*, from the same root as *naso* seeks only to lift up their colleagues, setting aside their own ego, insuring equal place and standing for each one. Describing the princes as modeling a way for the people to follow, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches, “They were the *n’si’ei yisrael*, Israel’s ‘bearers who had been raised,’ who by their position stood at the height of the national mission and from that position were to elevate the nation to equal height....”

As leaders all, each in our own way, may we help to raise this nation up from the racist depths of its shame. With words and deeds we raise up the memory of George Floyd, of Ahmaud Arbery, of Breonna Taylor, and so many others. Giving comfort and strength to each other on the long road to freedom, on the way to finally dedicating the sanctuary of love and harmony, I humbly share the following statement with you, an offering of words meant through its spirit and its action and resource links to lead to deeds.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor



Ad Matai/Until When?
**Statement of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis
on the Murder of George Floyd**

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The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis joins its voice to the great cry of horror and outrage that fills the land for the murder of George Floyd. Our hearts are breaking as we try to find words yet again, knowing from Jewish tradition and history that silence is never an option. *Ad matai/until when?* How long the brutal pandemic of racism that has plagued this country from before its inception? In a time of masks worn to protect in the face of the Coronavirus, the fault lines of race on which this nation teeters have been unmasked. We mourn with Black America for those who have been killed even now, in this time of international pandemic, by police and vigilante bullets. We grieve for those harassed and hounded for running, and bird watching, and even sleeping, while Black. We grieve for George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and so many others. And we likewise grieve for African Americans who have died at such disproportionate rates of Covid-19. We watch with horror as two pandemics collide in our society: the plague of racism and of the Coronavirus.

As we seek a Jewish path to justice, we turn to our own colleagues of color, our rabbis, our teachers, to be our guides. We turn to Jews of color in our communities, to hear the experiences and wisdom they would share to help move us further along on the path to justice. We cannot heal the wounds of racism in our country without simultaneously working to heal the virus of racism within ourselves and our communities. We reach out with humility to those among us who have known the double pain of racism and antisemitism.

The breath of God is sacred, breathed into every human being upon their emergence into this world: *And God breathed the breath of life into the human's nostrils/va'yipach b'apav nishmat chaim* (Gen. 2:7). It is the ultimate denial of God and humanity to squeeze the breath of life out of one of God's children, each one created in God's image. With his last breath of life, George Floyd cried out the same words as Eric Garner before him, "I can't breathe." Soon after Mr. Garner's murder in 2014, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis issued: [Black Lives Matter—A Statement of Jewish Solidarity](#). So many deaths later, *ad matai/how long*, how long until we as a nation really hear the struggle of Black America to breathe free? We lament that it takes the body of one African American man lying on the street beneath the knee of a white police officer to highlight the oppression of a people, to remind us how virulent the plague of racism still is among us. We lament that it takes a deadly pandemic to unmask the inequities faced by peoples of color; inequities that fester in economics, health care, education, housing, jobs, and criminal justice. A national reckoning and repentant change are long overdue.

We know that hope shall only come through collective action, when we take to the streets and “pray with our legs.” Inspired by a powerful legacy of nonviolence, we weep before the violence that has added to the burden of those who already suffer most from the systemic violence of racism. As Jews, we are a people who love words, but there are times when words no longer suffice, when words are hollow if they are not joined with deeds. The rabbis asked which is greater, learning or doing. In elliptical fashion, they answered, “learning is great because learning leads to doing...” (Kiddushin 40b). *Ad matai/until when?* God is waiting for our answer, waiting for us to say *ad kan/until here*.

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis offers the following action suggestions and resources as a starting point to build upon. Following the lead of communities of color, from out of the horror, grief, and outrage of this time, may we act on the blessing of George Floyd’s memory, and that of so many others, to bring an end to the pandemic of racism. It is for each of us to answer the question, *ad matai/until when?*

To Do:

- Discuss, as Jews, what “Black Lives Matter” means and how to affirm it
- Hear the stories/requests of Jews of color in our communities; consider impact of police presence in Jewish communal space on Jews of color.
- Commit to personally challenging racist comments in any time or place
- Promote study of Jewish sources making clear that racism is a *chillul hashem/a* desecration of God’s name
- Contribute to the [Massachusetts Bail Fund](#), and fundraisers for the families of [George Floyd](#), [Breonna Taylor](#), and [Ahmaud Arbery](#)
- Take action with the [Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action](#)
- Support the legislative initiatives proposed by the [Massachusetts Black and Latino Caucus](#)

To Watch, Read, Discuss:

- [“Believe Us”](#): Black Jews respond to the George Floyd protests
- [13th](#), a documentary exploring racial inequality and mass incarceration
- [The 1619 Project](#) (*The New York Times*)
- [How to be an Antiracist](#) by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi
- [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) by Michelle Alexander (and Study Guide and Call to Action)
- [T’ruah: the rabbinic call for human rights](#) – Resources on Police Brutality, Protests, and the Black Lives Matter Movement
- [Massachusetts Board of Rabbis: Black Lives Matter—A Statement of Jewish Solidarity](#) (2014)

