

Rosh Hashanah Day 2

Race Matters

A long time ago, after the Great Flood, the peoples of the earth came together. They could all understand each other, because they all spoke the same language. And together they decided to build a tower that would reach to heaven, so that they could make a name for themselves. But when the Holy One saw the tower, the Holy One decided that this could come to no good; and so the Holy One confused the peoples' speech so they could no longer understand each other, and scattered them over the face of the earth.

This is a familiar story. We probably learned it in Hebrew school. We may have imagined or drawn that tower, the tower of Babel, which gets its name from the confusion that suddenly broke out, one day, in the middle of the construction project. An ancient interpretation of the story, a Midrash, imagines that moment:

God and the 70 angels who surround the Throne of Glory went down, and God confused their language into 70 nations and 70 languages, each one according to its nation and its writing and its language. And God appointed an angel to each nation...

And it imagines the moment that followed, when the people tried to speak to each other in their original tongue but found they could no longer understand each other:

What did they do? Each man took his sword and they fought and killed each other, and half the world fell there, by the sword.¹

We might say this is just a story. But stories don't have to be real to be true. This particular story is teaching us a profound truth about the way human beings are wired, a kind of human default - that when we encounter difference we immediately turn to violence.

¹ Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 24

That default jumped into the headlines once more this year on May 25th. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, a Black man, George Floyd, was arrested for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, knelt on Floyd's neck for around nine minutes. For the first seven of those minutes, Floyd begged for his life and repeated, "I can't breathe." For the last two of those minutes, he was motionless. Chauvin's colleagues did not intervene. George Floyd was found unresponsive and pulseless inside the ambulance that was called, and pronounced dead in the emergency room of the hospital.

Protests erupted almost immediately. By June 6th, polls suggested that they represented the largest turnout of individuals in this country's history, at around 4,700 demonstrations. There was a sense that a spark had been put to tinder. Other names, other deaths, re-entered the headlines, to be remembered and re-evaluated.

And for many of us, part of the way we had previously understood the world, the way we had previously understood difference between human beings, no longer made sense. Many of us - myself included - were brought up to believe that we were 'color blind.' Many of us - myself included - were brought up to believe that because we had historically - or actually - encountered antisemitism, that made us experts in understanding racism. Many of us realized that we had only been paying lip service to the reality of difference. As the author Robin diAngelo sets out in her now widely-read book, *White Fragility*, we discovered that:

- we don't see ourselves in racial terms
- our opinions are uninformed
- we don't understand socialization
- we have a simplistic understanding of racism.²

It almost reads like a new *ashamnu*.

² *White Fragility*, pp. 1-14

And predictably - at least, predictably if we have internalized the story of the Tower of Babel - the moving of difference to the foreground turned the atmosphere violent. From verbal violence as we engaged each other on social media to actual violence in the streets. While we can be proud that the demonstrations here in New Orleans were conducted passionately but civilly, the same cannot be said of elsewhere.

And around the country and around the world the Jewish community also reacted. Feelings sometimes ran high: friends on facebook unfriended each other over what one of them had posted, voices were raised across actual and virtual dining tables and garden fences. Phones were hung up. But on the whole, across the community, we saw a heartfelt attempt to question our own assumptions and express some kind of solidarity. Many of us marched. Reading groups sprang up - for a while you couldn't find a copy of *White Fragility* or *The New Jim Crow*. An intense debate - still ongoing - concerned whether Jews could or should support the movement Black Lives Matter, with rabbis weighing in on both sides from all across the Jewish spectrum (Orthodox rabbis Ari Hart and Avi Weiss are particularly worth reading on this).

And as many of us realized how ignorant we were, a new kind of listening took place. My grandfather's words, 'you've got two ears and one mouth for a reason' took on new meaning. As we heard a great deal about the most-repeated commandment in the Torah being the one to love the stranger, we read and watched first-person piece after first-person piece to try to understand other's experience, to activate our empathy.

But we would be wrong to think that fixed it.

In his book *Humankind*, the Dutch author Rutger Bergman puts forward the startling thesis that empathy is itself a form of blindness. He quotes psychologist Paul Bloom's argument that empathy is a kind of spotlight. It zooms in on the specific; we can try to put ourselves in the shoes of one other person, but what about a hundred? a million? seven billion? We can't do it. Empathy is in fact "a hopelessly limited skill." Trying to put ourselves in someone else's shoes can actually compound the problem.

And he goes on to argue that empathy can even make us *less* forgiving: by shining a bright spotlight on a chosen few, we become blind to the perspective of our adversaries. Empathy and xenophobia are the flip side of each other.

So as we contemplate these last six months, what are we supposed to do?

Perhaps we have to start by admitting that just like the folk at the Tower of Babel we don't understand each other's reality. We can't understand it. But - and this is where perhaps we can change the script - we can try to imagine it. And in making this shift away from the purely personal, we open up some new possibilities.

We can move from the singular to the plural. We cannot prevent a death that has already taken place, however much we mourn it; we need to notice and then address the disparities and the structures, both obvious and hidden, that made such a scenario possible, and get to work changing them.

We can shift from our feelings to our morality. Our drive to empathize, to react subjectively, can actually get in the way of achieving justice. As has been said by many Jewish teachers, notably Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the nature of *tzedek*, the word we use for justice, has everything to do with a moral imperative and very little to do with love. It's not enough to have strong feelings. It's not enough to question our assumptions. We have to commit to achieving justice, which is more demanding, and messier, and will take longer.

And we can leave the terminology of being 'color blind' behind us. Instead, we have to consciously acknowledge the existence of difference and then decide what we are going to do about it. Often this is described as moving from being color blind to being anti-racist. Perhaps this year, that will be our *heshbon nefesh*, our self-accounting. Perhaps over the next ten days each of us will Google the phrase 'from color blind to anti racist' and study what comes up.

Because it's impossible to be 'difference-neutral'. Difference is wired into the human race as it was from the very beginning. Difference is wired into the human race as a challenge for us to identify, face down, engage with and ultimately move from a state of brokenness and waste and death to a state of *tikkun*, of correction, of rebuilding. We must do this: not out of self-interest - we know that in a fundamentalist worldview we Jews are also dispensable and will go down with the ship - but out of a commitment to stretching our imaginations beyond our personal ability to understand. Only then will we be able to avoid the fate of those who tried to build a tower to reach heaven and instead ended up destroying each other.

I want to acknowledge that this idea of shifting from understanding to imagining came to me from a member of our own community, Dr Mia Kearney-Bagneris. Mia, thank you: and I hope that all of us will act on your wisdom.

I want to give the final word to a voice of justice. The US courts have repeatedly considered cases about "affirmative action," the policy of taking steps to favor groups previously discriminated against. In 2014 a case in Michigan concerned a ballot initiative. The Supreme Court ruled 6-2 that a race-neutral policy was best, but Justice Sonia Sotomayor issued an unusually strong 58-page dissent. Here is an edited excerpt of what she said:

Race matters. Race matters in part because of the long history of racial minorities 'being denied access to the political process. Race also matters because of persistent racial inequality in society—inequality that cannot be ignored and that has produced stark socioeconomic disparities. And race matters for reasons that . . . cannot be wished away. Race matters to a young man's view of society when he spends his teenage years watching others tense up as he passes, no matter the neighborhood where he grew up. Race matters to a young woman's sense of self when she states her hometown, and then is pressed, "No, where are you really from?" , regardless of how many generations her family has been in the country. . . . Race matters because of the slights, the snickers, the silent judgments that reinforce that most crippling of thoughts: "I do not belong here." In my colleagues 'view, examining the racial impact of legislation only perpetuates racial discrimination. This refusal to accept the stark reality that race matters is regrettable.

Perhaps this year will be the year when each of us engages with the many ways that race matters.

We'll be posting this sermon on the shul website along with a couple of suggestions and lists of resources to serve as a starting point.

Shanah tovah - and let us get to work.

Sources:

Robin diAngelo, *White Fragility*

Rutger Bregman, *Humankind*

Suggestions for further learning:

<http://utzedek.org/2020-uri-ltzedek-anti-racism-campaign/uri-ltzedek-anti-racism-resources/>

<https://ready.web.unc.edu/>