

Yom Kippur 5781 – Why “Black Lives Matters” Matters
Rabbi Marc Israel

This morning I have no joke to begin my remarks, because my topic is not a joking matter. I will try to avoid politics, although my topic is often cast in political terms. This morning I will ask you to look deep inside yourself, although the issue is not primarily about you. The topic may make many of us uncomfortable, and while that is not my purpose, sometimes a little discomfort is necessary. This morning I will admit to you something I don't like to admit even to myself, let alone to others and I will ask you to think about whether it is true for you too.

I have racial-biases against Blacks in America and that at times, I have knowingly benefited from systems of racial bias without doing enough to try and end it. It's not that I do so purposefully, but I recognize this within myself, in terms of some thoughts and some of my actions.

This morning, I want to share why I see active support for Black Lives Matter as an imperative for me as a Jew and to discuss ways I hope our congregation might do more to deepen our understanding of this cause.

I know many of you are supportive of this viewpoint and that some of you are not. I suspect that my speaking about this will make some people uncomfortable or angry and may be tempted right now to walk away or flip off the feed. I ask that you stay and listen. You can and I suspect may still disagree. I will still respect you as I hope you will still respect me. And, I hope that after the holidays, you will share your perspective with me.

Knowing all of this, why would I choose to discuss this topic today of all days, on Yom Kippur, the most holy day on the Jewish calendar. It is exactly because it is Yom Kippur that I feel the need to address this topic. For I know that *chatati*, I have personally transgressed when it comes to racial bias and I believe our nation has also. But wittingly or far more likely, unwittingly, I suspect most of you have too.

I'm not here to discuss public policy – those are questions for another day. I'm here to talk about the sins that I have committed before God and humanity by forgetting the lesson from the Talmud which asks: “Why was only a single human being created first?” And answers, “So that no race or class may claim a nobler ancestry, to say, 'Our father was born first'” (Sanhedrin 4:5)

I want to share my story, not because it is remarkable, but because I think that to understand these issues, when need to look back to see where we come from and how we arrived to the place where we are. In many ways, mine is a typical story of a Jewish family growing up in the suburbs after 1968. In in the 1970s and 80s, I grew up in the Detroit area, which was one of the most segregated regions in the United States. During those two decades, the city of Detroit's population went from 55% white and 44% black to 23 % white and 75% Black. Meanwhile, my high school in Birmingham, Michigan – just five miles away – was 91% white, 5% Asian and 3% African American. Race was not a frequent topic of conversation because it didn't have much

impact on our daily lives. When I went to the University of Michigan, Blacks were still a small minority - during my years in Ann Arbor, Black enrollment increased from 5.3 – 7.8 % of the student population, only because racial diversity was an extremely important topic of conversation, and concentrated effort by the University to have the racial demographics on campus reflect the racial demographics of the state. But in my daily life, issues of race were not frequently discussed. Most of my friends were from Hillel or my mostly-Jewish fraternity, and there weren't many Jews of Color at the University.

I learned what I consider to be the standard narrative taught in the Jewish community about race. Racism is evil and Jews have always stood on the side of racial equality. I learned about the Jews who helped found the NAACP, the Freedom Summer martyrs Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner and saw the pictures of Rabbis Abraham Joshua Heschel and Maurice Eisendrath marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I learned that the Jewish community helped to draft the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I also learned that the Black community became more militant with the rise of Malcolm X and Black Anti-Semitism also increased, causing friction in the Black-Jewish alliance. I attended a speech by Reverend Jesse Jackson during the 1988 campaign to hear him first-hand, because I had heard so much about him, but I also understood my fellow Hillel students who protested his speaking on campus.

For most of my life, I defined racism as the hatred that is spewed by members of the Ku Klux Klan or the ignorance of the fictional Archie Bunker from the satire sitcom All in the Family. But when we recite the Al Cheyt prayer, we ask forgiveness for the sins we commit knowingly and unknowingly. I wasn't blatantly racist; therefore, I didn't think I was racist. I knew I had a certain level of economic privilege. I knew Blacks were still suffering from blatant and non-blatant racism. But I didn't realize that I was responsible in certain ways for perpetuating and benefiting from that racism.

One of my first active face-to-face encounters with systemic racism came when I served on jury duty in Washington DC in the late 1990s. It was a fairly straightforward case, afender bender, in which a young white Jewish woman hit the back of the car of a middle-aged African American woman. The Black woman was suing for damages related to medical issues she claimed were a result of the accident. The jury was majority black or Hispanic. I was one of three whites. During the deliberations that followed, each juror, regardless of race, expressed doubts on the veracity of the Black woman's injuries. There were some holes in her case, so we didn't trust her claim and granted a very small amount of financial compensation. Later, by happenstance, I met the lawyer who represented the plaintiff, and he asked if I would share some of the jury's rationale for its decision. I did and he told me that the injuries and costs were definitely real, but he knew it would be a tough case to win because of her race. I realized he was probably right. All of us on the jury – it didn't matter if we were Black, Hispanic or White, came in with a pre-disposition to assume that she was just trying to make some money off of this. If it were a white woman who was suing, we probably wouldn't have doubted her claims, at least not to the same extent. My experience on that jury showed me how our racial biases can impact even the way that we see a simple traffic accident.

For most of my life, I also didn't fully understand the concept of White privilege and I certainly didn't think I was a part of it. I believed in the ideal that if you work hard, America was a country where anyone could lift themselves up in society. But then, as Elianna began applying to college, I realized that this ideal is really a myth. Wealth plays a huge role in the college application process today – from reparing an application, tutoring for exams and taking them multiple times, and visiting campuses. I learned that most elite schools fill more than 50% of their class with applicants who apply with a binding Early Decision. At one school, we were told that if we applied Early Decision, the odds were greater than 50/50 that she would be accepted. If we applied at the regular time, she would have a 15-20% chance of getting accepted. But applying early decision isn't only about getting your application in early. It requires a blind, financially-binding commitment, not knowing what financial aid or scholarships you might receive. Given the racial disparities of income in America, this becomes another example of systemic racism. But, of course, I want what's best for my daughter and so we went along with the system and made sure she had tutoring and took the ACT multiple times, advantages that many minority students lack.

And one more thing – I have worked on this this over the years, but sometimes I still have a lead foot and I have been pulled over on several occasions for speeding or other traffic violations. Often, I was let off with a warning because of my clean record. I was never asked to get out of the car. I was never frisked. And no one ever searched my car. In fact, I never considered the possibility that any of those things might happen. Nor have I ever warned my kids about what to say if they get pulled over by a police officer. I just made sure that they knew where the paperwork is. But I've yet to meet a Black man over the age of 30 who can say likewise. I've yet to meet a parent of a Black boy over the age of 14 who hasn't had "The Conversation." Imagine how it would feel, knowing that still in 2020, you are considered more suspect because of the color of your skin. Imagine the humiliation and rage that might build up each time this happens. And it happens every single day, all across our country.

And I still believe that the overwhelming majority of police officers go into this line of work with noble ideals to protect the public, certainly not to harass Blacks. That is the difference in systemic racism, because it's not about individuals with hatred in their heart; it's about a culture and stereotypes that lead our society to make assumptions about certain people and to treat them as suspect because of the color of their skin.

Now, consider these examples and think about your own life. Despite your best efforts, can you think of times that you may have made assumptions about people because of their race? Or, if you are white, can you see times that you may have personally benefited by a system that assumes you to be innocent while it treats other people as suspect?

This is why Black Lives Matters is necessary. One hundred and forty years after the Civil War, 65 years after *Brown v. Board of Ed*, we have yet to make real the promise that all humans are created equally. We still forget the lesson of the Talmud that no one can lay claim that their ancestry should give them greater privilege than another.

But, I've been asked repeatedly in the last few months, how can I support BLM when there is anti-Semitism in the Black community or when one of the organizations that is involved with it has anti-Israel sentiments as a sentence in its founding document? Supporting Black Lives Matters does not condone the actions of every Black person nor does it endorse all of the beliefs of any organization. Perhaps the Jewish community holds the Black community to a purity test that we do not ask of others. We still work with Southern Baptists in coalition to support aid for Israel despite their belief that Israel is a stepping stone to Kingdom Come. We work with Catholics on issues of common concern even if many of us don't condone their position on abortion. Why do we hold Blacks to a different standard?

But what about anti-Semitism – don't we need to stay focused on those issues when it is rising in our nation? And why doesn't Black Lives Matter include it as part of its fight? Clearly, I don't need to tell you, there is rising anti-Semitism – we experienced it here when our building was defaced this past Spring. And two years ago, Elianna and I were walking home in suburban Philadelphia, when someone shouted a slur against Jews as they drove by us. And it goes beyond spray paint and shouts and has escalated to include shootings and stabbings. It is very real and we need to be working on it.

However, I don't think we need to bring up our victimhood every time Black Lives Matters is mentioned. As someone once said to me, it's a bit like shouting "its my birthday too" at someone else's party. Anti-Semitism is real - we need to work to obliterate it. And, at the same time, we must recognize that it is not the same as the issues that the Black and Brown communities in America face right now. What's the difference? A quick litmus test – what is your first reaction when you see a police car driving on your street or parked in front of the synagogue? If you say that you feel safer, as I certainly do, than you have just described the difference between systemic racism and the acts of anti-Semitism we have experienced. Anti-Semitism in America today is an issue of individuals and extremist groups. It is not systemic in the way that racial bias works. The Constitution was written to protect our rights as a religious people, even if it wasn't always applied evenly (and we know it wasn't). The Constitution was written to create Blacks as lesser people - 3/5 of a person, to be exact. And while that changed over 150 years ago, its stain on the fabric of our nation does not come off so easily.

I support Black Lives Matters because I believe that we must, as a nation, address these issues and also because it is what I believe that, as a Jew, it is what I am called to do.

And I speak about Black Lives Matter today not only as a confessional, but also a call to action. In just a little while, we will recite Unetaneh Tokef. We will acknowledge the many ways that we do not have full control over our lives. There are natural disasters, illnesses and other calamities that may befall us regardless of how good we may be. The flip side of that is the obligation to take care of those matters where humans do have control

Consider a few verses from an Unetaneh Tokef written about incidents that have taken place in the last few years. Each line is followed by a name or names of people who have been killed by police while engaged in the following activities:

In the morning it is written and by curfew it is sealed
Who shall die while jogging (#AmaudArbery)
Who shall die while relaxing in the comfort of their home (#BothamJean
#AtatianaJefferson)
Who shall die while seeking help after a car crash (#JonathanFerrell #RenishaMcBride)
Who shall die while holding a cellphone (#StephonClark)
Who shall die while sleeping (#Aiyanajones)
Who shall die for a traffic violation (#SandraBland)
Who shall die while coming from the store (#MikeBrown and #TrayvonMartin)
Who shall die while on the shoulder of the road with car problems (#CoreyJones
#TerrenceCrutcher)
Who shall die while reading a book in their own car (#KeithScott)
Who shall die while taking a walk with their stepfather (#CliffordGlover)
And Who shall die while begging for their life, for their breath (#EricGarner
#GeorgeFloyd)

These issues do not belong in an Unetaneh Tokef, because these are issues that humans can control. Individually, it is hard to change a system, but working collectively, we know that change is possible. The entire premise of Yom Kippur is based on a belief that we can get better – better as individuals, better as a community, better as a nation.

This why I believe it is important to take actions as a Tikvat Israel community. In the coming weeks, you will start hearing about opportunities to learn more about systemic racism. We will have opportunities to read books and have movie discussions and speakers. We will continue to reach out to other local organizations and churches who are like-minded. This is not about a political platform or a set of policy issues, but about building a deeper understanding of the issues, what role we play and what role we can play in making change. From those conversations, I suspect that some people may come to conclusions about certain policies, but our goal as a congregation is not to develop policy proposals but to come to terms with this hundreds-of-years old transgression. At one time this may have been committed completely unknowingly. But now, even if we still commit such acts unknowingly, we know that it exists and therefore must take action. If you agree that Blacks haven't been and still aren't being given equal treatment in our country, I encourage you to join us. You don't have to agree with everything I said or everything that is said at these sessions. We will work to create a safe space where we can work through some of our individual struggles. I am speaking about Black Lives Matter today because I don't want to add to that list of preventable deaths in that Unetaneh Tokef knowing that I did nothing to stop it. In the Mishnah, we are taught that one who says I will sin and ask for repentance, I will sin and as for repentance can not be granted atonement. Perhaps there was a time when we didn't recognize the problems, but now we know, and therefore, now we are obligated to act.