

***Teshuva and Racial Justice:  
Our Inner Work and Our Collective Responsibility  
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman  
Yom Kippur Day 5782***

*“The city of Constansa stands on the shores of the Black Sea. Many years ago, a man named Gershon and his wife, Fayga, lived there.*

*Now, Gershon was not always the best person he could be. True, the mistakes he made were not huge. They were common, ordinary things: a broken promise, a temper lost for no reason, a little “untruth” told here and there.*

*But unlike most people, Gershon never regretted what he did. He never apologized or asked for anyone's forgiveness.*

*This way of behaving became a habit. Gershon paid no attention to how he treated others; he didn't care. Oddly enough, he was able to see his mistakes and thoughtless acts, as if they were hairs shed by a dog. So, every Friday, Gershon swept them up and tossed them into the cellar.*

*Then, once a year, on Rosh Hashanah, he stuffed them into a sack, dragged the enormous bundle to the sea and tossed it in. But selfishness and thoughtless deeds are never disposed of so easily. There is always a price to pay, as Gershon was about to learn...”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Gershon's Monster: A Story for the Jewish New Year: A Story for the Jewish New Year  
by Eric A. Kimmel

These are the opening paragraphs of a children's book, called Gershon's Monster. A retelling of a Hasidic tale by Eric A. Kimmel. The story goes on with some, in my view, problematic theological views regarding the birth of Gershon's children and a scene when later as the kids are a bit older, they encounter a great monster in the sea:

*“All at once, the sky grew dark, as if a cloud had covered the sun. But it was no cloud. Gershon saw it rising from the sea: an immense shadowy monster covered with scales, like iron plates. On each scale was written one of Gershon's misdeeds. Father! Save us! The children cried out as the monster came toward them”*

During this day of Yom Kippur, we have been reciting and will continue to do so, again and again the thirteen attributes, calling God for God's Mercy.

הוֹדָה / יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֲרָךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת

נִצְרָ \*חֶסֶד לְאֵלֵּימָּם נִשְׂא עֲוֹן וְפֹשַׁע וְחַטָּאת וְנִקְיָה

*Adonai, Adonai, a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet God does not remit all punishment....*

But our liturgy stops mid sentence, not even after an *etnachta*, the parallel to a coma on the trope system that gives us the punctuation of the Torah.

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The words that follow are not easy:

לֹא יִנָּקֶה פִּקְדוֹן אֲבוֹת עַל-בְּנֵיהֶם וְעַל-בְּנֵי בְנֵיהֶם עַל-שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל-רְבָעִים

*but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.*

Like the story of Gershon's monster, we are told that our actions have consequences for our children. That our children pay for our mistakes, for our transgressions that we swept and tossed into the cellar or threw into the sea. That our sins do not go away, and that they will come back to our children.

This is an incredibly difficult message. As a parent, this scares me so much. I don't want my kids to pay for my mistakes, and as a daughter, I don't want to pay for my parent's mistakes. Perhaps this is why our liturgy stops just before that and focuses on the mercy of God and the possibility of receiving God's compassion today, for us to move forward, to do *Teshuva*, to change our course, knowing that is possible.

The words *וְנִשָּׂא עֲוֹן*, which in the context of the Thirteen Attributes means forgiving iniquity, literally means, carrying the sin. God carries our sin as an act of forgiveness.

Gary Anderson in his book *Sin: A History* analyzes the meaning of sin in the Jewish and Christian scriptures and beyond. He explores the different metaphors found in the Hebrew Bible for sin, including the notion of sin as a weight that must be borne. And he notes that sin as a burden is by far the most productive in the Hebrew Bible. The root *עָוָן* (*Avon*) is the most common noun for sin. As he writes, the most common means of talking about human sin was to compare it to weight<sup>2</sup> (pages

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<sup>2</sup> Pages 16-17

16-17). It is then, not surprising that the ritual of Yom Kippur that we read in the Book of Vayikra, Leviticus and that we retell at the Seder Ha-Avodah - the Service of the High Priest, is a ritual in which the weight of the sin is passed from Aaron the Priest to a goat, that then carries the sins of all the people as it is sent off to a precipitous land.

Perhaps, one of the most powerful liturgical choices of Yom Kippur is the fact that we confess in the plural. We say: *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu*. We have transgressed, we have betrayed, we have robbed. I imagine that none of us have directly done all of these things - all that is listed in the *vidui*, the confessional -- and as we ask for forgiveness we also do it, in the plural: *Slach lanu, Mechal lanu, Kaper lanu*. Forgive us.

The concept of collective responsibility is at the core of our acts of *Teshuva*. Yes, each of us is responsible for our own actions, but the core of living Jewishly is to live and be part of a community and not to live in isolation. The collective burden of our sins, past and present, is something we must face. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, “In a free society, some are guilty. But all are responsible.”

Today, I believe that one of the most urgent expressions of *teshuva* is how we address systemic racism. For people like me who are white -- or who benefit from white privilege -- this work can feel overwhelming. We can get trapped in a cycle of denial, which I found myself in many times, which sounds something like this: “Me? Racist? I’m not racist at all. I am nice to everyone!” Or perhaps we get trapped in a cycle of defeat, which sounds something like this: “I try so hard to say the right thing, but it’s never enough. I don’t think I will ever get it right. I guess I should just stop trying.”

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Learning to recognize our own biases and push through the fear of addressing racism is not easy work. My own story: As many of you know, I grew up in South America in a predominantly White/European community. The Jewish community was also predominantly White/Ashkenazi/European. But many people around me were not. They were indigenous to the land and their skin was brown. They were also from different socio-economic classes. Most of the people with dark skin who I knew personally were people who worked for my family. I, a white person with economic privilege and European ancestry, benefited from *them* -- people with brown skin who had less money and whose families had lived on the land for generations.

For a long time, I recognized in me, and still do, a sense of distinction and at times superiority for being white. As a Jew, I used to feel a sense of authenticity in being white and Ashkenazi when I would meet Jews with Brown skin or from a different socio-economic group. Slowly, I am learning to recognize the ways my childhood has shaped my sense of self; and the ways that I have been complicit -- even when my thoughts and actions are entirely unintentional.

In the summer of 2020, shortly after the murder of George Floyd, our community joined the call for racial justice in our country. We also began to look inward to see how we could advance our commitment to Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Racial Justice -- right here at TBZ.

I believe the work of *teshuvah* requires us to look at the outer world and our inner world. The work of racial justice requires that, too.

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We have learned this year that within the Jewish community -- including here at TBZ -- there is much to do to make our institutions safe and comfortable places for Jews of Color. The Jews of Color Initiative, a national effort focused on building and advancing the professional, organizational and communal field for Jews of Color released last month, findings of the largest study ever conducted of Jews of Color, *“Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color.”*

One of the more striking findings of the study was the reported discrimination in Jewish spaces: 80% of Jews of Color surveyed reported having “experienced discrimination in Jewish settings.” 54% experienced this in a synagogue. And only 51% of Jews of Color agreed “they have felt a sense of belonging among white Jews.”

We have to start listening. We need to do better. Right here. Right now.

I want to believe that TBZ is one of the communities where Jews of Color do not experience discrimination. We are blessed that one of our spiritual leaders is a Jew of Color, Rav Tiferet, and that in recent years we have welcomed even more Jews of Color into our community, intentionally and purposefully, with open hands and hearts. But let’s not think that the work ends here.

After a long process, including conversations with people in our community and beyond, I am pleased to announce that after the Holidays, TBZ -- with the full support of our Board of Directors and with gratitude to a few generous donors -- will be working together with Yavilah McCoy of Dimensions Educational Consulting to work towards deepening racial equity and inclusion within our community, understanding that we must first see and act within our own community in order to tackle racial inequities outside our community.

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We have to learn how to have constructive conversations about race in our own lives and to explore the role we all play, even if unwittingly, in enabling systemic racism to continue.

Our work for racial justice within, and outside our own community must happen simultaneously with our efforts to fight anti-semitism. After all, racism and anti-semitism are closely linked.

Over the past several months, some Jewish leaders have struggled to recognize this truth. At times, they question why racial justice should be a communal priority, especially when violence and discrimination against Jews remains a problem in different parts of the world -- including right here in Boston. I understand that instinct. For many of us, it can feel more urgent to address anti-semitism rather than racism. But of course, it is not a competition. And when we speak of “us,” when we talk about *our* Jewish community, we need to recognize that Jews are a multi-racial people; our community has always been racially diverse, and we will continue to be multi-racial for generations to come.

I also understand that some Jews are nervous about anti-semitism within the Black Lives Matter Movement. The Jewish Council for Public Affairs reminds us that “Every movement has its radicals. However, it is unfair, untrue and inimical to our own best interests to characterize the movement as antisemitic”<sup>3</sup>

We can hold two banners at once: one that asks our neighbors to stand against anti-semitism and respond to the hatred that we continue to experience as Jews. And

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2015/09/Talking-Points-on-Antisemitism-and-BLM.pdf>

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one that reminds us that systemic racism is one of the most terrible injustices that exists in our country.

This work is hard. It is messy. We will make mistakes along the way. I certainly have made my own mistakes! But I want to challenge all of us to commit to being on a learning journey. No one expects us to be perfect, but I believe we all must strive for racial justice. It is the call of our Jewish tradition. It is our obligation to teach our children about the injustices, systems and lived experiences that our country is built on. What we teach our children is our only hope for a future that is built on principles of anti-racism.

As Amanda Gorman, the National Youth Poet Laureate stated at last year's Presidential Inauguration:

**“Being American is more than a pride we inherit. It's the past we step into and how we repair it.”**

We are all carrying the burden of generations by not speaking about racism. We are carrying the burden of a Jewish community that, for too long, did not welcome Jews of Color into our midst as equals. We are carrying the burden of our parents and the parents of our parents.

*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu.*

**We have transgressed, we have betrayed, we have robbed.**

And like Gershon discovered in Gershon's Monster, there's only so much stuff that can be shoved into the cellar. I hope and pray that we are brave enough to examine

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our messy stuff -- the painful truths that perpetuate racism -- and then move forward with humility, with courage, and with grace.

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