

DISMANTLING RACISM ROSH HASHANAH 5765 SERMON

In Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*, the owner of a record store recalls an encounter with a customer: "Have you got any soul? a woman asks. That depends, I feel like saying; some days yes, some days no. A few days ago I was right out; now I've got loads, too much, more than I can handle. I wish I could spread it out a bit more evenly, I want to tell her, get a better balance, but I can't seem to get it sorted. I can see she wouldn't be interested in my internal stock control problems though, so I simply point to where I keep the soul I have, right by the exit, just next to the blues."

Some days, I too feel like I have loads of soul. The feeling often comes from being a witness to holy moments, the kind that have the potential, as we say, to open up the heart of the world. It is those moments spent with you and your loved ones that fill me with soul. Moments that become stories; each story is in itself a whole Torah, describing deep relationships, containing hidden messages, teaching timeless lessons and values.

Last April, for example, Abby Lester became a Bat Mitzvah along with her mother Pam. Clearly, that shabbes was charged with significance for their family and for our community. When Abby's father Ken came forward to wrap his wife in her new tallit, he said something to the order of, "I am confident that this tallit is authentic because the knots of the tzit-tzit (the ritual fringes) were tied by Pam and her friends under the supervision of Amy Fleisher!

It was so wonderfully refreshing to hear a women's name (let alone my wife's name!) associated with the supervising of whether or not a mitzvah is kosher. Now--it is true, thank God, that there have been women rabbis for over thirty years and women leaders in the Jewish world for much longer than that. Yet, there are still vast areas of Jewish life that seem completely the domain of males. I can only imagine (because I wasn't invited) the uniquely feminine vision, heart and soul that were tied into those tzit-tzit.

And of course, there's even more to this story. The reason that Ken felt the need to comment on the authenticity of the fringes that were tied unto Pam's tallis is that the garment itself wasn't exactly traditional. It was a scarf, made in Vietnam, and purchased there by Ken's mother Gerri, may her memory always be for a blessing; poignantly the last gift given from mother-in-law to beloved daughter-in-law.

Knowing that there is a tallis out there with roots in decidedly non-Jewish Vietnam is also quite heartening to me. Even up to the present moment, blind traditionalism and simple chauvanism has made it difficult for many Jews to believe that non-Jewish spirituality and cultures, not to mention individual non-Jews, should have an influence on our religion. Yet, a more open mind and heart

might even believe that a tallit with such a cultural cache might enable a davvener to enter into prayer with much needed Buddhist stillness.

Every good story deserves midrash, readings that infuse it with expanded meaning: Here's one: That Vietnamese scarf with tzit-tzit tied under the supervision of a woman **is** the Judaism that we have been lovingly creating at CRC for twenty years. Every single individual-every one of you, for example, is part of our communal tallit, but so are we wrapped in the unique visions of broad groups of people. Alongside the expected materials-that of the Biblical ancestors and prophets, the Rabbinic sages, the classical Jewish mystics and philosophers, Ashkenazic customs from the west and Sephardic traditions from the east, the rational reformers-we believe that it is a sacred obligation to weave into our tallit strands that are often ignored, strands from some extremely beautiful fabric. I'm speaking of the fabric grown from the intelligence, experience and psyche of Jewish women, of course-but also those which represents Jews who were born into other religions, Jews who are Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual or Transgendered, non-Jews and non-Jewish spirituality, Jews of African origin and other peoples of color. Each of the strands is unique and has it's own has rich and wonderful color and texture; we anxiously await a truly magnificent garment once they have all been woven together.

It might be helpful to imagine a page of Talmud. Fantastically post-modern before its time, the printing methodology was to wind spirals of separate commentaries around a text which itself was written by multiple authors conversing over a number of generations. The 'voice' of one contributor only added to the existing text; a new stream of ideas didn't necessarily negate old ones. Our friend, diversity consultant and 3'rd generation African-American Jew, Yavilah McCoy told me that she always thought of the Talmud as a quilt. As they came along, various sages would add their patch, just like, when they are old enough, many African-American girls embroider their own patch which is added to a quilt that tells the ongoing story of the generations of women in the family.

The time is ripe to open the Talmud to new embroidery, so that we stitch in the patches of these different voices without negating the valuable wisdom added earlier. Some of these different teachings will be brand new, others will come from groups that have long been with us, but ignored by our tradition. This new Talmud, our expanded tallit, might again allow us to live up to one of our most ancient names-Ivri/Hebrew, meaning 'one who crosses over;' a name given to us because of our ancestor Abraham and his reputation as a boundary crosser. The whole world has internalized the iconic photograph taken by the Apollo astronauts of our planet, the picture of the blue and green sphere that proved once and for all that all of our national and tribal boundaries are totally artificial. If Judaism is going to be relevant to Jews and to humankind in this century, we must continue to cross those boundaries and open ourselves to an ever-expanding diversity of influence, reflecting this new map of reality.

As our tradition wisely counsels, we have been making a continual cheshbon hanefesh/an accounting of the soul so that we may rise to the crucial challenge in this journey towards full openness and inclusion. This searching process led us to question whether the African-American children and adults who are part of CRC and those who visit in the hopes of being part of our community are made to feel welcome as Jews. Truly welcome; are our hearts open to their journeys, open to entering into relationship as fellow Jews? Do they feel that they have a spiritual home so they can begin to bring themselves and the wisdoms, cultures and experiences of people of color to the Judaism that we hope to grow so that it can nurture us all? We considered the troubling notion that this has not yet happened fully and that the attitudes and divisions over race that permeate our nation had entered our sukkat shalom/shelter of peace and wholeness. Judaism began with racial diversity-just look on a map to see the boundaries that Abraham crossed-but racism in the United States forced us to see Judaism as a white phenomenon, poisoning our natural relationships with people of color and separating our Jewish family.

Of course, Judaism is not the only well that racism has poisoned. It began to become abundantly clear to Rabbi Talve and myself that each time we became involved as clergy in the many important issues that face our community, the racial divide appeared to be the biggest stumbling block to a solution. Jonathan Lethem's important novel, *Fortress of Solitude*, describes a friendship between two boys, Dylan who is white and Mingus who is African-American. Though Mingus is clearly more intelligent, resourceful, charismatic and talented than Dylan, it is Dylan who ultimately succeeds while Mingus' future is desperate and doomed. A systemic racism seems to pervade each corner of society and make Lethem's depressing fictional scenario real and commonplace. We are witness to the sad fact that Martin Luther King Junior's haunting words from 1967 still ring so true in St. Louis, 2004:

"When the constitution was written, it declared that the Negro was 60% of a white person. Today, another formula seems to declare that he is merely 50% of a person. Of all the good things in life he has approximately one-half those of whites, of the bad he has twice those of whites."

The deep desire to be part of social change has led us to committing this synagogue to a community wide effort to dismantle racism with the hopes that our efforts will make for a richer CRC community, a stronger Judaism, and a more healed world. It is a humbling experience to be speaking to this congregation on the subject of racism. So many of our founders have been integral in the world of working towards racial justice, and we continue to attract people who have made that struggle a priority in their lives. But, we tried to imagine the powerful potential of so many taking on the task in a Jewish context as one kehilla/holy community.

We have decided to call this dismantling racism initiative Ani Ve Atah/You and I. Each of us. All of us good people together. In Hebrew, there is no word that is spelled with only one letter. You'll notice that even the word for I, Ani, contains three. The language is whispering to us: Maybe we shouldn't be doing this alone. This is meant to be a communal effort, 700 households honestly learning, confronting and sharing our baggage (schmutz that has been passed through the generations), fears, hopes and dreams around race in order to create true and lasting change inside our synagogue. And the same time, we believe we will be able to transform a congregation with several committed individuals into a single institutional ally that will be formidable in the task of finally erasing racism from the social institutions outside our temple doors. Perhaps other communities will follow suit. This is exactly what we dreamed of when we declared that we wanted to be one of the sources of responsible and long-lasting moral action in our home, the City of St. Louis.

I have no illusions that everyone will immediately see this work as necessarily related to a Jewish congregation. Some might have a gut sense that we have gone too far in inserting an aggressive social agenda into a house of worship. To my knowledge, nobody has addressed these concerns as articulately as the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a fully observant Jew, born in Poland and descended from generations of learned and revered Hasidim. Rav Heschel saw an unbreakable link between religious Judaism and dismantling racism:

"To act in the spirit of religion," he stated, "is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child. Racism is worse than idolatry. Few of us seem to realize how insidious, how radical, how universal and evil, racism is. Few of us realize that racism is man's gravest threat to mankind."

The genius of that passage is that it connects racism with Judaism's gravest religious sin and action against racism with Judaism's loftiest goal. Idolatry, worshipping a part of creation over its totality, is of course prohibited in the 10 commandments, and let us recall that Abraham was an idol-smasher even before he was a boundary crosser. Uniting what lies apart is the hope of the Shema-discovering the oneness underlying the diversity of God's creation. Clearly to Heschel, the uprooting of racism is a mitzvah gedolah, a major commandment, a challenge to all serious Jews to break apart the idolatrous stereotypes, fears, the conscious and unconscious domination that conspires against the godly goal of a united humanity by saddling people of color with a clear disadvantage. Racism is everywhere, everyday. We have made strides in a positive direction, but I believe strongly that dismantling racism is still the central religious obligation of our time. As Rabbi Heschel said so often, "In a free society, few are guilty, but all are responsible," and as Rabbi Hillel said before him, "If not now, when?"

We begin to smash the idol of racism when our mental picture of Jews include people of all skin colors. We unite what lies apart when our dark skinned Jewish children see themselves reflected in the synagogue environment around them-in

the curriculum, in their teachers and leaders, in the faces of peers and when they see their Jewish identity affirmed in all of our faces. We begin to smash the idol of racism when we recognize that the existence of anti-Semitism never negates the impact of racism. We unite what lies apart when we as white Jews start to figure out a way to apply the Jewish principle of tzedakkah/righteous sharing to spreading some of our privileged status, white privilege that has accrued over generations, to people of color. For, despite the fact that financial status, health issues, sexual orientation, religion, and life's many sadnesses and challenges means we all face disadvantage, life is still easier in many ways for white people than for people of color. We begin to smash the idol of racism when we fully internalize the disastrous ramifications of the fact that the majority of African-Americans are only a few generations removed from relatives who were captured, bought and sold as property and considered sub-human. We unite what lies apart when we find ways to have more, not less racial integration in our schools, neighborhoods, social lives, work places and houses of worship, actively seeking ways to stop living in all-white worlds. We begin to smash the idol of racism when we take the opportunities that those encounters and relationships can afford us by understanding individuals of color without pre-judgment or self-centeredness. We unite what lies apart when we consider the possibility of applying racial diversity to the books we own and the photographs and artwork in our homes so we do not leave the images and associations of people of color that our children will carry into adulthood in the hands of a morally neutral media. Zoey plays 'Guess Who,' a facial recognition game. It wasn't until I saw another version that I realized that ours contained only white faces! Time to buy the new version. We begin to smash the idol of racism when we insist that our institutions-schools, police, courts and businesses- become actively anti-racist. Despite a marked decrease in personal prejudice and racist intent, those and other important institutions are still entrenched with racism after years of internalizing historical injustices, We unite what apart when we interrupt racist remarks and jokes whenever we hear them, considering it an opportunity for a 'teachable moment' in this multi-faceted effort le-taken ha-olam/to bring repair to our world.

Look for Ani ve Atah to take the form of a variety of programs, events, discussions and actions that will take place as we enter into this new year, 5765. The first of these will take place on Yom Kippur, at a breakout session led by CRC members who said Hineini/I am ready to our call for individuals to participate in a retreat to train leaders for the initiative. It is our hope that there will be a dismantling racism program that will reach each age group, each circle, every chavurah/subset of our CRC family.

On a personal note, once again, I am moved to express my deep gratitude to be part of a community which so lovingly pushes itself to be on the cutting edge of spiritual and social change. Because of Susan Talve, who deserves full credit for birthing this initiative, and her astounding vision and determination to do the right thing, my already rich rabbinite will include intimate involvement with an issue

that I have cared deeply about since the time that I stupefied my 3rd grade teacher in the suburbs of Chicago by wearing a 'Black Power' tee shirt to school! Yet, for all of my passion, I know that there are times that I want to hide myself, deny the magnitude of the problem, stay safely in the zone with whom I am most comfortable. When that happens, as it will inevitably happen to us all, I know that renewal will come precisely because we, Ani ve Atah, are entering into this covenant together. I will rely on you, as I hope you will be able to rely on me, and we will surely, finally, overcome.

We often refer to the first chapter of Bersisheit-our story of the beginning-during Rosh Hashanah, the start of our new year. As the autumn season and the shofar awakens us to a new year, it always seems possible to live up to the lofty promise held at the dawn of creation. Our tradition teaches that God started humanity with one man and one woman so that we could never say to one another, 'my ancestors were superior and more deserving than yours.'

May our efforts in this new year bring us closer to that intended equality of opportunity. May our heart-felt teshuvah lead to the return of Judaism to its natural state of racial and cultural diversity. May all of humanity's descendants be represented by a multitude of beautifully different strands of our magnificent tallit which serves to remind us of our obligations to self and other. May we all feel deserving and advantaged and privileged and loved and valued.

And may it be year filled with health, blessings, love and loads of soul to all of you, my sacred friends. Le shanah tovah!