

About two months ago, Sarah and I were walking to our car after a lovely date night downtown. It was a perfect August evening, no humidity, a slight chill in the air, but no need for jackets. The sky was clear and the stars sparkled above. There were loads of people on the street, more college students than would have been around a month before, but townies were out as well. It really could not have been more idyllic. As we approached our car, we started to hear screaming.

“You all are racist!”

There was a black woman screaming at a white man. He stood at the entrance of a downtown restaurant, arms crossed, blocking the door. The woman was screaming at the top of her lungs. “How is that four white men walk into a restaurant, get seated and have their orders taken and here I am all by myself and I haven’t even been brought water. So you just kick me out for getting my own water?!? You all are racist!”

Her hands were flying in the air, she was moving around erratically, and my heart started beating faster. Sarah and I walked by, giving each other a look. After a few more steps and another look at each other, Sarah said, “Should we go back and see if we can help?” “Yes,” I said, “let’s go back.” We returned to the entrance of the restaurant, and witnessed the continued episode. The woman was distraught; the man was silent, unmovable. The entire scene was just heartbreaking.

The woman gave up; she turned and walked toward us in pursuit of a bench to rest her body as she recovered from this incident. We looked at her and asked, “Is there anything we can do to help you?” She looked up at us, pulling a cigarette from a pack, and said, “Nah, there isn’t anything you can do. I just cannot believe I have to put up with this crap in my own town. I am *from* here and I am treated like this. Here in my hometown.” Sarah and I walked away, wishing we could have done more, hopeful we had done enough.

As white people living in America, we had a moral obligation to get involved. As two white Jews living in America, we had a Jewish obligation to not stand idly by. This incident happened just after the tragic events of Charlottesville, and I am certain that the torch-filled demonstration was one of the reasons Sarah and I turned around. We could not walk past that scene anymore, we could not pretend we were not hearing and seeing what was taking place right in front of us. We were done imagining that we do not straddle a complex notion of whiteness and Jewishness in America.

Enough...enough!

Of course, for people of color, this incident is nothing new. A few days after this occurred, I was speaking with an African American friend, and this person said to me, “You know Josh, I’ve dealt with this kind of thing all my life. I have just learned to keep my head down and keep going. If I got upset every time I experienced some racist moment, I wouldn’t have any time to do anything else.”

I can appreciate this sentiment. Who am I to judge the reaction of another person to hatred aimed at them? In a moment of clarity, I looked at my friend and responded, “I have no right to tell you how to react to these things, and truth be told, racism isn’t your problem to deal with. It’s a problem of the white community. We are the ones that need to deal with it.”

Racism is our problem. It is a Jewish problem. We are a part of the problem, and we have benefited from the problem. As a white man, I have a responsibility to step up in these sorts of situations; I am a beneficiary of the institutionalized racism in our country. I am never followed while I am shopping in a store; I am never pulled over because of the color of my skin. I have received all of the benefits of being white, even though I am also a Jew. And, while I believe white people in this country have a responsibility to work for change in behavior and policy, I believe the Jewish community has a special role to play.

White Jews in particular occupy a delicate place in American society. As American’s, there is no doubt, we have arrived. Our lives in America, especially as Reform Ashkenazi white Jews, are likely better off than at any other time in history and any place throughout the world. We have representatives in Congress, we have nearly had a President and Vice-President, and we lead major corporations. Colleges and universities are filled with Jewish faculty. We are accepted in just about any profession in almost any hall in America. While there may be some low grade anti-Semitism, and the occasional flare-up of more extreme anti-Semitism, in general, there is not anything in our country we believe we cannot attain. As some Jewish historians could tell you better than I, we could spend multiple semesters discussing how very different the American experience has been for us Jews. Yes, we most certainly have arrived.

But have we? For many of us, even for members of our community who are not Jewish but married to Jews and raising Jewish children, we wonder, *are we as safe as we thought we were?* Bomb threats at JFS, Anti-Semitic calls to TBE and Beth Israel, swastikas spray-painted in a park, the JCC evacuated, this is Ann Arbor in 2017! The racists and anti-Semites in Charlottesville chanted, “Jews will not replace us.” We are being provoked in ways I have never experienced in my lifetime.

Within academia, the discussion of Jewish whiteness, by which I do not mean the color of our skin, but our acceptance in Anglo-society, is a place of disagreement. Some argue that we are fully white, while others view our whiteness as conditional. Many of us might also feel this tension. I bet there are a number of people in the congregation today who would argue they are not white even if the color of their skin suggests they are white. I imagine the majority of folks here today would concede their whiteness having benefitted from the color of their skin for decades. This issue is very much alive and well in the world, and maybe even finding new life.

Just recently, with the release of the movie *Wonder Woman*, the question of Jewish whiteness was all over the Jewish Newspapers when a blogger for comicbook.com, Matthew Mueller, wrote, “*Wonder Woman* hits theaters tonight... So consider this a PSA – if you will – for those who have called out concerns about there being no person of

color in the film. It might come as a shock, but there are people of color in the film, and one of them is in the **lead role**.”²¹ Mueller claims that since Gal Gadot is Israeli she should not be considered white. Mueller’s comments elicited articles from the Washington Post, a number of articles in the Forward, and Ha’aretz and the Times of Israel, two Israeli newspapers. My point today is not to adjudicate the diverse points of view, but to raise the question, how do you see yourself? If you are married to a Jew of Ashkenazi descent, did you think you were marrying a white person? I welcome a conversation around this issue in the coming days and weeks. For now, let me share my position with you.

As a White Jew of Ashkenazi descent living in America, our government and most people see as just another white guy. However, for some people, some of the time, I am seen as *other*. “Jews will not replace us,” they chant. That racist, anti-Semitic faction of America is currently experiencing a rebirth, and we are in a unique position to deal with this problem. We white Jews straddle a line. We walk through the American milieu still living two lives.

We are utterly American, and yet today we are not on the golf course, we are not on the soccer field; we are fasting and contemplating our mortality. How utterly un-American. We straddle a line, because although we may fear physical and emotional harm from anti-Semites, that harm does not come at the hands of our government, even if recently condoned, even if fanned by our most senior government leadership. I do not believe most of us fear that the people who are meant to protect us will end up hurting us because we are Jews. We call the police and expect, and in almost all cases, receive exemplary service and protection. We straddle a line because while we benefit from white privilege, we know there are actors in our world who are willing to kill us because they see us polluting the whiteness of America.

The people who hate us most certainly hate African Americans. Anti-Semitism and racism are more than siblings, they are twins. Because most of us in this room feel both the privilege associated with our whiteness and the threat of harm because of our Judaism, we fall into a precious category all our own.

In this room are lawyers who have argued before the Supreme Court, professors who lead their fields, doctors who save thousands of lives through research and teaching. We sit together, members of this community, Beth Emeth, this house of truth with access to affluence, with access to all levels of government. And, for those of us who don’t feel quite that connected, we gather together as the most important members of our country, citizens able to work for a more perfect Union. Our *nearly* universal acceptance in White America obligates us to use our power to affect change in the racist core of our American History.

We must not let the fear of anti-Semitism get in the way of working for the eradication of racism. The rot of racism sits at the very center of our way of life. It is mixed into the mortar of our government. It is memorialized in the stones of the walls of the US Capital building. Some of us fear poking the bear. If we say too much, if we *do* too much,

will we provoke anti-Semitism? We must never let our fear of anti-Semitism prevent us from standing up to racism.

Even when this moment of racial intolerance simmers down, America's racist history will not be dealt with until our children learn in elementary school that slaves built the White House and US Capital. It will not be dealt with until our football teams are not just populated by African American players, but *owned* by African Americans. And it won't be dealt with until the criminal justice system treats a black man the same way it treats a white man. These, and others, are our true challenges.

And, it seems, even when we try to address the atrocities of the past, we still cannot get it quite right. In 2012, *just 5 years ago*, congress placed a marker in the Capital visitor center. Here is an excerpt the Architect of the Capital website, it begins,

“Although the entire contribution of enslaved African Americans in the construction of the Capitol Building cannot be determined due the scarcity of documentation, there is enough information to know that the role they played had a significant impact on the project.”ⁱⁱ

Nice enough, but then it continues regarding the marker,

“The marker is located towards the western end of the northern wall of Emancipation Hall in the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) where it is bathed in sunlight for a portion of each day and will not interfere with visitor flow.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Yes, it may just be a mistake in wording, but come on! It will not interfere with visitor flow? It *should* interfere with visitor flow; it *must* interfere with visitor flow. How can a monument to freedom, built in part by slaves, *not* interfere with us? How will we ever conquer racism if we are highlighting the fact that the small marker placed 154 years after the emancipation proclamation does not interfere with visitor flow!

The institutional and structural racism of our country goes much deeper than this, of course, but that obtuse writing and sentiment makes me want to scream. We have so much work to do as country.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Justus Baird, Dean of Auburn Seminary, wrote just a few weeks ago about our country's need for collective repentance. He writes:

“As a society, we Americans have no process for communal repentance. This summer, before and after the spectacle and tragedy of the protests in Charlottesville, we renewed public debates over what do to with civil war monuments.

How, exactly, does a society repent for actions that took place generations ago? Black American thought leaders are laying the groundwork for

reparations, a major conversation about financial repentance for the sin of slavery upon which this country was built.

Other societies have walked this path. What can we learn from how Germans struggled with its leadership of the Holocaust? From Catholic and Protestant theologians who wrestled with their interpretations of Judaism in the mid-twentieth century? From the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa?”^{iv}

Justus is correct, communal repentance is required. We will never realize a brighter future until this communal repentance is not only recognized, but communal repentance is only *part* of what is required. Individual repentance must also be required.

I do not disavow the privilege I have received as a white person in America, and repentance, in this case, is not about ending the way I have been treated, but about raising our awareness of how others are treated. It is about ensuring all people, regardless of race, are treated the way I am treated. Denouncing privilege is not about rejecting fair treatment; it is about ensuring just treatment for all. We Jews, as guardians of Torah, as beneficiaries of Whiteness in America, must work for this realization for all. This is our moral obligation now. This is our personal repentance. And this is our hour.

In the Torah reading for Yom Kippur, we read Atem Nitzavim Hayom Kolchem:

“You stand this day, all of you, before YHVH your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—to enter into the covenant of YHVH your God.”

The foundation of that covenant, the mitzvah commanded more than any other throughout Torah, 36 times, we are told, *be mindful of the widow, the orphan, the stranger*. These were the people in ancient Israelite society with few rights; these were the people societies were against. Torah reminds us, over and over, and over again, our covenant stands on our obligation to care about these people. Our covenant stands on our obligation to fight for these people. Our covenant stands on our recognition that these are our people, they are you and you are them. Our covenant stands on our memory of what it is like to be strangers in a strange land. **This** is the covenant we enter into today. **This** is the covenant that God demands of us, and that **we** must demand of ourselves.

When Sarah and I walked down the street in Ann Arbor, and we heard a black woman screaming about racism, we decided to get involved. I also decided to post my experience on Facebook, and a few people who responded thought I overreacted to the situation or, at least, did not have enough information to get involved. I even received a call from the manager of the restaurant I wrote about on Facebook. The manager told me that he was the one standing there blocking the entrance to the restaurant that evening. He told me that he had good reason to remove the woman from the restaurant, that she was a constant nuisance in his restaurant and others, she was a “street person” he told me. A friend of the

manager even reached out to me a few days later, telling me that the manager was in no way racist.

I am not sure what my heart believes and I do not think I will ever be sure. I also think it does not matter whether he was being racist or not. However, I am sure, even in the murkiness of what was really going on, that we had to get involved. 240 years of slavery, Jim Crow, and racist government policies are facts in this interaction as well. When a person of color calls racism, we must believe them. We expect people to believe us when we cry anti-Semitism, and if a non-Jewish person were to disregard our claim, we would likely say at best, they just don't get it and at worst, they are anti-Semitic as well.

I happen to be involved in a group at my kid's school called Interrupting Racism. Interrupting Racism was started about 6 months ago through the PTO, it is a multi-racial group of parents discussing issues of race and racism in an effort to help our kids deal with these things as well. I shared my story, including my concern that maybe I had done the wrong thing, or gotten involved when I didn't know enough, or that I should not have posted about this on Facebook.

When I was done telling my story, one of the mothers in the group looked at me, a black woman with tears in her eyes, and said "Thank you." She told me, "All the facts don't matter; you had the facts you had, you heard and saw a woman who was pleading for fairness, a woman who was screaming for justice. We need more people who will just stand up and get involved because they see something happening, even when they don't have all the facts."

In this age of alternative facts, in this age of good people on both sides, in this age of white supremacists with torches in hand chanting about us, we do not need both sides of the story. We do not need all the facts to get involved. We just need the one fact "We stand this day, all of us, before YHVH our God—our rabbis, our doctors and our lawyers, our accountants, our stay-at-home moms, our teachers, our police officers, our stay-at-home dads, our psychologists, and our dentists, our children, our spouses, and those who have married a Jew, from woodchopper to water drawer, our entire community—to enter into the covenant of YHVH our God."

ⁱ <http://comicbook.com/dc/2017/05/31/wonder-woman-person-of-color/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.aoc.gov/art/other/slave-labor-commemorative-marker>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.aoc.gov/art/other/slave-labor-commemorative-marker>

^{iv} <http://auburnseminary.org/yom-kippur-need-collective-repentance/>