Racial Justice: Acknowledging our Sins
Yom Kippur Sermon
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Yom Kippur is marked by our communal confessions. There are two main reasons we confess in the plural rather than the singular. First, community confessions are a communal accounting of wrongs. On Yom Kippur we seek not just to change ourselves, but the world in which we live. We cannot do that until we have a real reckoning, a real look at where we have collectively gone astray.

Second, communal confessions inspire personal reflection. The first time we confess a sin, we might pass over it without much thought. I didn't bribe, we think. I didn't give false pledges. But, as we recite these and again and again we think more deeply about our actions. I did promise my children a reward if they did something I needed them to do. I did tell my friend we would meet up and never got together with him. The communal confessions make us more likely to examine our individual behaviors closely and to better understand the harmful actions we have taken.

We confess to examine the wrongs in our society. We confess to more closely examine our own actions.

This Yom Kippur, 5781, when we look at our society and when we look deeply into ourselves, we have much to confess. We are destroying our planet, the beautiful and life giving earth entrusted to us by God. Our hyper-partisanship and the breakdown of social norms makes even the sometimes heated debates of the Talmud seem tame. Our current treatment of immigrants would make our immigrant ancestors weep with sorrow. Our ineffectual response to this pandemic is costing lives and livelihoods and generations of Jewish doctors, all the way back to Maimonides, would be horrified. All of these would make fine topics for communal confession and self examination. I'm not going to talk about any of them tonight.

I'm going to address the communal issue most cited by you in both the confessions you wrote and the silver linings you found--racial justice. This is not a sermon to shame or berate. This is not a sermon to educate with facts and figures or to hold myself up as a paradigm of righteousness. This is a chance to do what we do on Yom Kippur--look at the ways our community has failed and look deeper into ourselves—to see how we take part in those failures. If we can not take this honest look on Yom Kippur, then I don't think we ever can.

This is hard and heartbreaking work. To be honest, I would much rather give a sermon about the power of return or how we relate to God or really almost anything else. I would rather recite the words in the prayer book than have an honest reckoning about the harms that I, and we, have committed. It breaks my heart. It makes me despair. It is painful to think about the harm we have done.

Judaism is not an easy religion. It doesn't let us off the hook. We are a religion of action. What you do matters. And we have this day, this awe inspiring day, when we are asked to do the hard work. It is easy not to. It is easy to put on our white clothes and fast and recite our prayers and decide that we have done our work. But, our tradition demands more. Tomorrow morning we will hear the words of the prophet Isaiah warning about going through the motions. He decries fasting without social change. Really. He said, twenty five hundred years ago, that Yom Kippur was about creating a more just society. We cannot do that if we do not spend some time, together, in real confession--even if it is painful and uncomfortable. We, unlike so many others, have the option to ignore this problem. Let's not take the easy out.

[Congregation recites Ashamnu together]

Pulitzer Prize winning author Isabel Wilkerson, in her new book Caste: The Origins of our Discontents, compares American to an old house. As many of us who live in old houses know, there are many mysteries to uncover and many structural problems to overcome. However, we can not ignore the problems in our houses. Wilkerson writes, "Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not." "with an old house, the work is never done, and you don't expect it to be." Wilkerson continues (and I'm going to give you a long excerpt here):

> "We in the developed world are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even. Many people may rightly say, "I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked indigenous people, never owned slaves." And, yes. Not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have had nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now."[1]

They are ours to deal with now. As we look back at the history of our country, we know most of our ancestors did not kill Native Americans with war and disease. Most of our ancestors did not own slaves or profit from the slave trade. Many of our ancestors were not even on this continent until the 1900's. But, we live in this land today. That means we are heirs to what happened. We must, as Wilkerson says, address the problems with the foundation, even if we did not cause them.

> "And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands. Unaddressed, the ruptures and diagonal cracks will not fix themselves. The toxins will not go away but, rather, will spread, leach, and mutate, as they already have. When people live in an old house, they come to adjust to the idiosyncrasies and outright dangers skulking in an old structure. They put buckets under a wet ceiling, prop up groaning floors, learn to step over that rotting wood tread in the staircase. The awkward becomes acceptable, and the unacceptable becomes merely inconvenient. Live with it long enough, and the unthinkable becomes normal. Exposed over the generations, we learn to believe that the incomprehensible is the way that life is supposed to be."[2]

So, let us look at the foundations of our American house, not to tear it down, but to really see what is there so we can work to repair the damage.

[We rise for the Al Chet]

For these sins, God, we ask forgiveness
For the sin of saying that being patriotic means ignoring difficult parts of our history.
For the sin of not teaching our children.
For the sin of trying to "civilize" the Native population, who were civilized long before we arrived.
For the sin of forced migration.
For the sin of taking away the land of people who had lived on it for generations.
For the sin of willful ignorance.
For the sin of forcibly stealing people from their homes and communities in Africa.
For the sin of the deaths of those on slave ships who never lived to see our land.
For the sin of the whip.
For the sin of the fields.
For the sin of expanding our borders and treating native inhabitants as others.
For the sin of exploiting free and inexpensive labor.
For the sin of erasing language.
For the sin of erasing culture.
For the sin of erasing names
For the sin of looking the other way.
For the sin of "go back to where you came from."
For the sin of "your kind are not welcome here."

[Congregation recites v'al kulam together]

Bryan Stevenson is the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and the creator of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, often known as the lynching memorial. He says that public memorials to our past atrocities are necessary.
"In Berlin today you can't go 100 meters without seeing a marker or a stone that was placed next to the home of a Jewish family that was abducted during the Holocaust. The Germans want you to go to the Holocaust memorial because they want to express their awareness that something horrific happened and that it can never happen again." He continues,

> "We don't talk about slavery. We don't talk about lynching. We don't talk about segregation….We have to acknowledge the places where terror lynchings took place. There aren't places you can go in this country and be confronted with the history of racial terror and violence and walk out and say never again. And because nobody says "never again" what we see happening is, well, it is happening again. And so we have to do that truth telling work. Then we have told the truth. Only when we've told the truth, can we begin the hard part of repair."[3]

So tonight we'll begin by telling the truth:

[We watch the EJI Video: https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial]

As a part of my sabbatical, my family and I visited Montgomery. We planned an entire trip down south to see this memorial. To me, visiting this memorial felt like holy ground.
At the beginning, the pillars almost sit on the ground and you can read the individual names. As you continue, you walk downhill and the pillars gradually hang above you like bodies. On the bottom of each you can read the name of the county when the lynchings took place. On the wall beside you are the "crimes" that were committed by those who were murdered. Entering a room where white women were sitting. Referring to a white police officer by his name without his title. As you walk underground back towards the entrance, you come to water running down a wall. Towards the end you come to a clear box filled with earth from places where African Americans were lynched. This reminds you of the glass jars lined up in the museum, each containing the name of someone who was lynched and soil from the county where the crime occurred. At the end, of the memorial you journey outside where replicas of each column lie like coffins, waiting to be claimed by the counties where the lynchings occurred. This reclaiming can only happen when a community works to confront and publicize the lynchings that happened

These lynchings, writes Stevenson, "were not isolated hate crimes committed by rogue vigilantes. Lynching was targeted racial violence at the core of a systematic campaign of terror perpetuated in furtherance of an unjust social order. These lynchings were terrorism."[4]

[We rise for the Al Chet]

For these sins, God, we ask forgiveness
For the sin of the lynching of Edward Johnson in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1906. His death sentence by an all white jury was stayed by the Supreme Court. He was then taken from the jail, hanged and shot hundreds of times.
For the sin of lynching 232 additional people in Tennessee.

For the sin of lynching 168 people in Kentucky.
For the sin of lynching 185 people in South Carolina.

For the sin of the lynching of Luther Holbert and an unnamed Black woman, possibly his wife, in Doddsville, Mississippi in 1904. Their fingers were chopped off and given out as souvenirs. They were burned to death while the crowd of hundreds ate snacks and drank lemonade and whiskey.
For the sin of lynching additional 652 people lynched in Mississippi.

For the sin of lynching 123 people in North Carolina.
For the sin of lynching 492 people in Arkansas.

For the sin of the lynching of 17 year old Henry Smith in Paris, Texas in 1893. A mob of thousands watched as he was tortured and burned alive.
For the sin of lynching 334 additional people in Texas.

For the sin lynching 549 people in Louisiana.
For the sin of lynching 311 people in Florida.

For the sin of the lynching of Elizabeth Lawrence in Jefferson County, Alabama in 1933. The schoolteacher scolded some white children who were throwing rocks at her. Her house was burned to the ground and she was lynched that evening.
For the sin of lynching 360 additional people in Alabama.

For the sin of lynching 84 people in Virginia.
For the sin of lynchign 492 people in Arkansas.

For the sin of the lynching of two unknown people on February 28, 1913 in Habersham County Georgia**.**
For the sin of the lynching of 587 additional people in Georgia.

For the sin of the lynching of people outside the south--15 in Ohio, 56 in Illinois, 5 in Colorado, 2 in California and more.
For the sin of lynching all those whose stories were lost to history and remain unknown to us today.[5]

[Congregation recites v'al kulam together]

I want to invite everyone to take a breath. We have one more confession left. Reading that horrible list of sins, we can be tempted to think that all of this is in the past. Yavilah McCoy brings us into the present. McCoy is an African-American and a fourth generation Jew. She grew up in an Orthodox home in Brooklyn and founder of Avecha an organization which raises awareness of the fact that Jews are "multidimensional and multicultural."[6]

She wrote the Al Chet prayer we are about to recite. She said, **"**As we utilize this prayer, in this time, amidst a global pandemic and a national uprising for racial justice and equity, I am hoping that we can specifically use this prayer to deepen our own and others commitments to fully dismantling racism in every space we navigate. In my personal observance of this ritual prayer, saying *Al Chet* in plural form welcomes my attention to the fact that in seeking truth, reconciliation and repair in eliminating the sins of racism in Jewish spaces, I stand as one with my people, and my people, and my people, and my people - all of us commonly indicted and commonly responsible for doing what we must, across diverse entry points, to deepen racial equity, grow racial justice and repair the brokenness of our world."[7]

[We rise for the Al Chet]

For these sins, God, we ask forgiveness
For the sins we have committed through the denial of the tzelem elokim (the divine spark) within Black bodies.
For the sins we have committed through segregating Black bodies from participation and leadership within our institutions.
For the sins we have committed in deceiving others by not teaching our children the worth, value and contributions of Black people.
For the sins we have committed in not honoring and protecting the journeys of Black elders and Black children.

For the sins we have committed in commoditizing Black people and Black bodies in our business dealings.
For the sins we have committed in not caring for the ways that race and class intersect in our efforts to deepen community with Black people in Jewish spaces.
For the sins we have committed through turning Black bodies into objects of lust and sexual gratification.
For the sins we have committed through confessing our commitments to ending racism insincerely.
For the sins we have committed that desecrate the divine name by allowing White Supremacy habits to shape/determine our practice of Judaism.
For the sins of racism that we have committed knowingly and unknowingly that continue to do damage to our siblings, children, families and community.

[Congregation recites v'al kulam together]

Traditionally in Judaism we end with a nechemta, a word of comfort. Tonight we are going to sit with the pain. Tomorrow I'll talk about where we go from here, and how we find hope, but not tonight. Tonight, we will sit together in despair and heartbreak and think about the harm we have done. I invite you into a moment of reflection on your own, silently. Think about the house we all live in--whose cracks and breaks we often ignore. Think about all those who deaths are not memorialized. Think about what is happening in our country today. Think about our communal confessions. Think about your individual confessions. It is this communal recitation and reflection that helps to change our community and ourselves.[8]

[Silent Confessions]

[1] https://www.marketplace.org/2020/08/05/america-is-an-old-house-isabel-wilkerson-on-race-and-caste-in-america/.
[2] Ibid.
[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laNPFqZuXd0
[4] https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/
[5] Ibid.; https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/explore/Alabama/elizabeth-lawrence.
[6] https://blackandjewish.wordpress.com/2006/09/19/people-yavilah-mccoy/
[7] http://www.jewishemergentnetwork.org/al-chet
[8] Thank you to Rabbis Ana Bonnheim, Andy Gordon, Esther Lederman and Ariana Silverman for readings earlier drafts of this sermon and giving me amazing insights, advice and encouragement. This sermon is better because of you. Also thank you to Chris Myers Asch, who is my teacher and my editor.