

When I originally gave this sermon, I continued the misconception that African American men were disproportionately targeted by hate crimes then African American women were. Thanks to Professor Leigh Goodmark I have since had this misconception corrected. If you would like to learn more, please look up <http://aapf.org/sayhernamereport>. This sermon has been edited to reflect what I now know to be true. I apologize to all I misinformed.

Bokker tov/Good morning. This last year, I have been thinking a lot about history. When I was a little child, I was taught that history was an objective collection of facts. When I went away to college, I learned that history was a collection of stories told from the teller's perspective. The word itself, history, was deconstructed to be his-story or her-story. Who writes history? What is acceptable history? And most important, how does history define who we currently are and are yet to become? The answers to these questions are as relevant today as they have been since human beings have been telling their stories.

This summer Ilyse and I had the opportunity to travel to NC and TN. One of the stops on our road trip was Memphis, TN where we not only spent many an evening on Beale Street, but also revisited the horrors of slavery, the joy of the reconstruction period, the terror and disillusionment of Jim Crow laws, the hope of the civil rights movement and the resurgence today of white supremacy groups, not only at the civil rights museum but also at the Sun Studio and the Museum of Rock and Soul where race and music collided, creating a whole new sound.

As Ilyse and I were enjoying our vacation, one nagging question kept haunting me. How do we deal with painful history? It is easy to embrace good history—take the Exodus story. We were the slaves. Pharaoh was evil. Moses led us to freedom. Everyone breaks into song and dance. Ok, so some uncomfortable moments existed in between, like when Gd hardens Pharaoh's heart. What does that mean anyway? Gd killed innocent children. How can I

worship such a Gd? Ultimately my people rose up and claimed their right to self – determination. Now that is a history we can and do embrace in our daily and Shabbat liturgy, in our theology, and, of course, during one of the most popular Jewish holy days of the year, Passover.

I remember when our older children were about 8 and 10 and they heard about the Egyptians on the nightly news. They said something like, “All Egyptians are horrible cruel people.” After some probing, it became clear they were conflating contemporary Egyptians with ancient Egyptians. We corrected their misconception and moved on. But I wonder what the discussion would have been like if we were the contemporary Egyptians trying to distance ourselves from the actions of our ancestors - much like those of us who are Caucasian are trying to distance ourselves from the horrific pain of slavery and racism which still affect our contemporary world.

What do we do with our painful history? Part of this complicated discussion is symbols, not only confederate flags and civil war statues, but also biblical stories of Priests slaughtering innocent animals, like the goats in today’s Torah portion, an institution based solely on birth right, by definition creating a male-centric hierarchy, passed down from one generation to the next and a theology that anthropomorphizes Gd, thereby limiting Gd to our human characteristics.

What do we do with our painful history? And can those coping mechanisms give us some insight into what we as Americans might do with our painful history?

Before I continue, at this point it is important to make clear, the *we*, I am referring to is the contemporary Jewish progressive movement, the Jewish world in which I was raised, live,

work, breathe and believe in. Not all Jews react to painful history the same way. Today on Yom Kippur, it is my job to think about my own soul. There is still plenty of work to be done here.

So how do we understand painful, problematic biblical texts? For one, we do not hide them; we do not wipe the slate clean as if the past did not exist. When Rodney was in third grade, his teacher introduced slavery to the students in social studies. After the class was over, a few girls approached the teacher and declared that slavery was inappropriate and they should not be learning about such things in school.

As cute and funny as that story is, it reflects what many of us in the Jewish progressive movement want to do. We know it is painful history. Now let's move on.

But the problem with that theory is that it ignores the continuous nature of life. The American chain from slavery to today is continuous. One would not exist without the other. And until we understand our foundation and the different forms of both personal, institutional and policy-driven racism that has continued to afflict our country, we will never be free to move on. To quote The New York Times Magazine issue, "The 1619 Project," "Out of slavery-and the anti-black racism it required-grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional; its economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, diet and popular music, the inequalities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day."

Second, we allow free discussion and critique of what was and how we are different from those who came before us. We do not allow the past to stand without a contemporary understanding of the values embedded within it. One of the many mistakes I have made in my

career is to read every year the Rosh Hashanah Torah portion without pausing even for a minute for those in our contemporary world who have been slaves, raped and/or used as financial bargaining tools. I, too, have so much to learn.

The traditional way to study the bible is out of the “mikra-ot gedolot,” a book that has about six commentaries for every biblical verse. One of the reasons I like our mahzor, our High Holy Day prayer book, is that the Torah portion is accompanied by contemporary commentaries. Reading the Torah portion without any thought of how to understand it is not Jewish. This ancient book which we embrace as our foundation has plunged us into a future very different from itself and stayed relevant because of the critique of it.

Take today’s Torah portion. We read about an ancient ritual of slaughtering two goats, knowing full well that the majority of Jews have not sanctioned slaughtering goats in almost 2000 years. We lift up the contemporary antecedents of repentance and forgiveness, letting the abuse of animals resound hollow along with the patriarchal hierarchy that carried it out. The fact that your rabbi is a woman is a visual critique of a system CJC was founded on to transform. Our foundation remains surrounded by our contemporary critique.

Third, we confine our reading of the biblical text to a particular time and place. Every Torah story does not wander into our siddur or our theological discourse. Rather, it is given a small controlled outlet, allowing its rightful role as our founder to exist without bleeding into the rest of our life.

Finally, we dedicate our energy to creating a world where positions of power are elected positions, where victims of slavery, rape, violence, poverty, and neglect have a safe haven in which to rebuild their lives.

The question I have is how do we apply those very same principles to our lives as Americans? How do we lift up the pain of racism, not only the slavery that ended in 1865, or Jim Crow laws which institutionalized lynching, pain and suffering for 100 years from 1865 to 1965? How do I, Sonya, acknowledge that I am responsible for the disparity that exists today in salaries, education, housing, treatment by law enforcement, and access to good health care? The opioid crisis was not acknowledged as a mental health crisis until white people started to die, just like AIDS was not a disease until heterosexual people started to contract it.

The United States still has a long way to go before our painful history is confined to the past--- for today it is bleeding into our present.

Until we as Americans listen and talk honestly about race and the effects of racism on today's world, until we acknowledge the pain confederate flags and civil war monuments cause just like the pain swastikas causes, until children everywhere in the United States understand the contemporary antecedents of racism, there will be no change.

In Judaism the biblical text never lives in a religious service alone; it is always surrounded by prayer and commentaries. Until we create a country where the symbols of pain, like the Lorraine hotel where Dr. King was murdered, is turned into a civil rights museum. Until that happens we are covering our eyes and ears, pretending that racism will just evaporate on its own.

There is a lot of talk about reparations. I will be honest. I have heard many different forms of reparations and I am confused about the *tachlis* mechanisms of how to do it. But I am not confused about the need for the USA to come to a day of public acknowledgment of the ongoing outcomes of slavery and Jim Crow that continue to cause pain today, including but not limited to, the rise of white supremacy in our contemporary world. We are very quick to expect

others to understand the high rate of anxiety and depression of Jews because of our horrible history. Isn't it time we also recognized the high rate of pain and economic and educational suffering caused by racism, including the number of African American who are pulled over, beaten up, imprisoned and/or killed while driving, running, walking, living as Black?

How can we be surprised that white supremacy is visible in our country? It never went away. Rather it was silenced, locked in a closet. Every time our country has tried to address the endemic racism that exists, white supremacy groups have become visible, vocal and violent. As Harvard Professor George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." When we fail to learn, confront and teach our true history, we should not be surprised when it comes back to haunt us.

We as Americans have to confront our country's racism in an institutionalized educationally sound, pervasive country-wide way or the rise of white supremacy will continue because we decided to deem history as an inappropriate chapter rather than the foundation on which our country was built.

This last year I have been thinking a lot about the prayer *aleynu* we will recite at the end of the service. It begins with the word *aleynu*-“it is up to us;” Not up to Gd, but up to us to praise/*l'shabeah* Gd. There are many different ways to praise Gd in Judaism. One of the many is with the prayers as we did today and every Shabbat, the other is with our actions. For our deeds must match our words. The rabbi in the Talmud, Yoma, asked, “Why did the very center of the holy of holies in the temple, that no one except the high priest once a year on Yom Kippur entered, need to be made with pure gold? After all did Gd really care about all those riches?” The answer is that it was to remind us that our internal life must be as pure as our external one. We must walk, live and breathe our talk; otherwise it is meaningless.

But it is truly that last paragraph of the *Aleynu*, I have been thinking about-the one all too often we recite silently. The paragraph where we pray for a time when *l'taken olam*-Gd will fix the world and all the wicked will return to Gd. It is up to us, to remember that our actions matter - what we say, where we go, how we spend our money, who we listen to, who we vote for and what we see matter. For in the Talmud, one of the two ways the messianic age comes is by creating a world so sacred Gd could live in it.

In a moment we will turn to supplement number 4 where we will find the prayer "Return, based on the Hebrew word *teshuvah*. In Joe Buchanan's prayer, he begins with "I will take a long look at me and think about what it is I see." But all our Hebrew confessionals are not only about me but rather about us---what we as a society, as a country, have done.

What do we do with painful history? We teach it. We comment on it. We work against the contemporary manifestations of it. We say our *al chets*; we also take responsibility and we live never again into our lives. Never again will we let schools in predominately black communities be underfunded. Never again will we allow children to be sent home from school because we do not have air conditioning in schools in the South. Never again will we let lead-filled water go untreated in our poorest of neighborhoods. Never again will we let imprisonment be a substitute for receiving substance abuse treatment. Never again will one's right to carry a war weapon be more important than one's right to live freely. Never again will one person's fear outweigh another person's right to breathe deeply. Never again will health insurance be seen as a privilege instead of a right. Never again will I benefit from services provided by people who do not make enough money to pay their rent. Never again will I allow voter registration fraud to block African Americans from voting. Never again will I stand idly by as another human being

is shot while living as Black. Never again will my words ring hollow because my actions do not change. Never again.