All The People of the Earth
Yom Kippur 5777
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

"We are the product of ignorant people, who have been taught an ignorant thing. Which is, that there are four or five different races.

There are **not** four or five different races. There is only **one** race on the face of the earth! And we're all members of that race - the human race! But we have separated people into races, so that some of us can see ourselves as superior to others. We thought, it would work. It hasn't worked!"

This past summer in the midst of the scourge of race violence in the United States anti-racism activist and educator Jane Elliott blew up the internet when her 1-minute clip on a cable news show articulated those words in answering the question, "Why is there racism?"

What a question. And what an answer!

In the big picture, the big ***BIG*** picture, what exactly IS racism? A lot of things are called racism, but fundamentally racism, in its many guises, is about exclusion. It's about saying we are different and I am better than you.

I have no idea what it is like to be a black man in the United States or a First Nations teen raised on a reservation in the shadow of Canadian residential schools. I have no idea what it is like to be a Palestinian living in the territories or a Mexican immigrant or Syrian Refugee struggling to climb over a fence that some have already built in their hearts if not along their borders. I can't even begin to imagine what my life would be like if I had been born in Eritrea or Sudan, or India, or Somalia, or Afghanistan, and not born white, and male, and in North America. I don't know what it feels like to be a transgendered teen struggling with my identity in a school locker room; and I don't have any clue what it feels like to do the same job as a man but be paid 30% less for it because I am a woman, or be told I'm now too old for a job I have been doing all of my adult life, replaced by a computer or outsourced to a call centre.

I have no idea what it feels like to be one of **"those"** people, people judged and excluded by others out of ignorance, people literally held captive by the ignorance of others, but my values, my Torah, my Judaism commands me that I should. Because as we read every year at Passover, "my father was a wandering Aramean, and we were once strangers in the land." We were once 'those people' and woe to us if we ever forget it. My goodness! Who in this whole world should better understand being victims of ignorance, and being held captive by racism better than us? You could say we wrote the book on this subject. Actually we really DID write the book on this [INDICATE TORAH] and in it…. **We are commanded, "Pidyon Shvuyim / פִּדְיוֹן שְׁבוּיִים Redeem the captive!"**

Judaism demands of me empathy for the widow, the orphan, the stranger. My Judaism is built upon the age old Jewish value of holding complexity. It implores me to be conscious of both privilege and suffering, not only mine and that of our people throughout history **but** of others as well. That is the work of empathy - imagining myself into someone else's narrative, and imagining their narrative as my own.

My Judaism reminds me daily that **ALL** lives matter, BUT the lives of those in peril, or jeopardy, under the gaze of persecution or the boot of authoritarianism those lives matter MORE right now and it is my Jewish duty to redeem them. Too many are imprisoned in our world today, trapped by circumstance, sentenced by intolerance, surrounded by bigotry, tortured by racism. The prison walls are built high by indifference, they are topped by razor sharp tongues that cut like wire and guarded by towers of prejudice that cast long shadows from generation to generation.

We are *commanded*, "Pidyon Shvuyim / פִּדְיוֹן שְׁבוּיִים Redeem the captive!"

At Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust museum, there is an avenue lined with trees. If you've ever visited this awesome place you know its power. In a world of total moral collapse there was a small minority who mustered extraordinary courage to uphold human values, to redeem the captives in an unredeemed world. To resist the racism and bigotry that were no longer below the surface but like the flood waters of Noah, ran wild over the land.

These were the Righteous Among the Nations. Contrary to the general trend, these rescuers regarded Jews as fellow human beings who came within the bounds of their universe of obligation. They didn't say, 'Not my people, not my problem' but rather they said – we are all people – racism, intolerance and bigotry that is all of our problem and I must not remain indifferent, I must not stand idly by the blood of my fellow.

To honour these courageous individuals Yad v'Shem began by planting a tree for each rescuer that saved the life of another, they planted 2,000 trees over time, then they ran out of room. The list now exceeds 27,000. And how many more followed them? People of conscience who came to our aid because a courageous neighbor set a moral example their hearts could not ignore?

And us? What are we to do? How do we end racism? How do we free those held captive by small minds and closed hearts? Can we create a world where the plaques and trees honouring the righteous exceed those memorializing the victims of injustice?

Maimonides says that's the greatest mitzvah in the whole Torah, freeing those that are imprisoned by others or by circumstances such a race, gender, orientation or social conventions. Why the greatest mitzvah? Because it saves two lives there's and ours, for how can we live freely in a world when some are not free.

He writes: "Redeeming captives takes precedence over supporting the poor or clothing them. There is no greater mitzvah than redeeming captives for the problems of the captive includes all of the other problems of being hungry, thirsty, unclothed, and they are in danger of their lives too."

Verse after verse, mitzvah after mitzvah the Torah implores us, demands of us specifically as Jews, because we are Jews:

- "Do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy fellow"[1]
- "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed".[2]
- "You must surely open your hand to him or her"[3]
- "...Love your neighbor as yourself";[4]
- "Rescue those who are drawn to death"[5]

The Shulchan Aruch adds: "Every moment that one delays in freeing captives, in cases where it is possible to expedite their freedom, is considered to be tantamount to murder."[6] and the Talmud puts the point on it precisely, "Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."[7]

We must free those held captive by the smallness of some people's thinking, the selfish view that I was born better than you because I am I and you, well you are not I, you are not me.

Some have called Anti-Semitism the oldest hatred in the world, and while we could debate its age, we have no doubt of its paternity – it is just one of the multitude of bastard children born of racism and bigotry, its lineage can be traced all the way back to the time of Noah and *sinat henam*, the senseless hatred that flooded the earth long before God washed away the sin and the sinners.

But like a weed, the sin of racism and senseless hatred has come back. We Jews, who have been on the receiving end of its lash time and time again throughout history know this all too well. It's always there, just below the surface, it's just below the surface in others and if we are honest with ourselves, and on Kol Nidrei of all nights we must be honest with ourselves as we

---

[1] Devarim 15:7
[2] Vayikra 19:16
[3] Devarim 15:8
[4] Vayikra 19:18
[5] Proverbs 24:11
[6] Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 252:3
[7] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

stand before God in judgement, it is just below the surface in us as well. Indeed, sometimes, in the heat of an argument, the impatience of waiting in line, or behind a driver of a certain age, race or origin it comes bubbling out.

We find this particularly in the vitriol surrounding the US presidential election. But it is not only there, the same forces of what Commentary Magazine calls ill or anti-liberalism are driving nationalism and extremism around the globe. I saw it this summer on our temple mission to Central and Eastern Europe. In every country they pointed out their own version of Donald Trump, and not with pride, but wary knowledge that, "we have been here before."

There is a portion of the population that feels threatened by unrelenting change — immigration, globalization, terrorism, multiculturalism — and those people want someone to, metaphorically at least, build a wall around their cultural heritage, which in the United States they conflate in equal measure with American heritage.

Donald Trump alone is frightening enough, but oh how much more horror in the realization that 40% of America seems to ***agree*** with his racist leanings… 150 million Americans think he's pretty much right!

In many ways the man is a mirror. He is a reflection of — indeed a revealing of — the ugliness that people can harbor, perhaps until now expressing it in ways that were more coded and politic. Trump is an unfiltered primal scream of the fragility and fear consuming white male Americans and their global equivalents everywhere.

To quote Princeton and Kate Monster in the Broadway Musical Avenue Q:
Everyone's a little bit racist
Sometimes.
Doesn't mean we go
Around committing hate crimes.
Look around and you will find
No one's really color blind.
Maybe it's a fact
We all should face
Everyone makes judgments
Based on race.

The Talmud addresses it in this way: Our rabbis ask why God began with only one human, Adam, and tradition answers, 'So that not one of his descendants should be able to say: my father is better than your father' (Sanhedrin 37a). The rabbis offer a further reason: in this way no race can say that it is better than others.

Human life has infinite value, not just Jewish lives or the lives of those like us, but all lives. And lives that are in danger, that are held captive, in that moment they are more valuable than even our own.

How do we end racism? How do we free those held captive by small minds and closed hearts?

It begins with seeing our similarities not our differences.

So much depends on our similarities. Unless we all worked the same way, all designs would fail, medicine would be ineffective, and human society would become impossible.

Yet we also affirm that each individual is unique. No two people look, think or act exactly alike. Both human sameness and difference are profoundly true.[8]

The Rabbis compared faces to minted coins. A king of flesh and blood, they said, stamps coins and they all look alike. The Divine stamps us and each is different. We are all still faces, but none is a copy.

Part of the wisdom of living is to keep each message in mind when we encounter the other. This is the binocular vision of being a Jew and particularly a Reform Jew.

When we see a throng of people and from a distance everyone looks alike, remember that each is different. That is why our listening campaign and conversations are so important for our community. As the Talmud puts it, when you see a crowd of Israelites, bless God who knows each person. Everyone has his or her own stories and secrets.

Yet when we are dealing with a single person, we must remember that we all have much in common. We all have fears and dreams and difficulties and sensitivities. It is the gift of our sameness that enables us to have empathy and create community. And it is the gift of our uniqueness that permits every human being to learn from one another.[9]

There are a growing number of congregations around the world and particularly amongst progressive congregations in Israel in which the last line of the Kaddish prayer has been amended. Traditionally, we ask the God who makes peace in His high places to make peace for us and for all Israel — "*aleinu v'al kol yisrael*."

Tonight I am asking that our congregation adopt the practice of adding four additional words: "*v'al kol yoshvei tevel*, and on all the earth's inhabitants" to the last line of the mourner's kaddish. Notice we don't say "and on the non-Jews, too." That would make them other rather than thou. Instead, let us open our words to bloom fully into a request to bring peace not only on us and the people of Israel, but on the whole world as well.

What I am asking of us in this New Year is consciousness - consciousness of the pain of people of who society considers, including Jews - as other. Consciousness of privilege and injustice.

---

[8] Based on a teaching by Rabbi David Wolpe

[9] ibid

Consciousness of how we are implicated in that systemic privilege and injustice, and how to bring tikkun, genuine healing, to a world that is both terrible and beautiful.

I believe that it starts with adding four words to our most personal prayer. Rabbi David Teutsch explains: “Adding the rabbinic phrase *v’al kawl yoshvei tevel* (and for all who dwell on earth) logically completes the concentric circles of our aspirations – our care starts with our minyan, extends to the entire Jewish people, and radiates outward from there to all who share our planet.” Its starts there, but it is only a beginning.

I ask that we do this to remind us both of our uniqueness and our sameness. To remind us that we all come from the same parent, that every life and tragically every death has profound meaning, not just the life and death of those like us – every human being is “like us”.

We are *commanded*, “Pidyon Shvuyim / פִּדְיוֹן שְׁבוּיִים Redeem the captive!”

We are the product of ignorant people, who have been taught an ignorant thing. It is clearly our job to fix that, to ***lead the way*** in fixing that. And the sooner the better!

Oseh shalom b’mromav, hu ya-aseh shalom aleynu, v’al kol yisrael, v’al kol yoshvei tevel, v’mru Amen

May the one who makes peace in the Heavens, make peace for us, and for all Israel, ***and for the people of the earth*** and let us all say AMEN!