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Awakening

"How did you wake up?" my college suitemate asked me during one of those late-night, everything-is-on-the-table, no-holding-back, jarringly honest conversations you have at 3:00 a.m. when you're exhausted and your heart just feels open. An African American young man who grew up in the Bronx on one bed, a Jewish kid from a small town on the coast of Maine on the other.

He asked me this question because I had just published an article in the Spectator, the Columbia College newspaper. The article was making some waves on campus. An unrestricted \$30 million gift had been made to the college, and the administration announced its plans to renovate our student center. I wrote an article of protest, asking how we could possibly justify that decision when the current student center -which seemed perfectly fine to me - was surrounded by poorer, predominantly African American neighborhoods. I was confused and angry by the living contrasts of deep poverty and great wealth. I viewed the college's decision as a choice to perpetuate that contrast, not repair it.

When my friend asked me, in response to this article, "How did you wake up?," this is what I told him:

I woke up a few months ago, after a night out with my friends, we took the subway back uptown to 116th street, got off the train and started walking towards the wrought iron gates on campus. Those gates seemingly reached to the sky, distinguishing the campus from the surrounding neighborhoods.

At that time, there were many homeless people living on the streets on those blocks, and late at night they were often asleep on the sidewalks, and it's New York City, so everyone was out late at night, and there wasn't much room on the sidewalk to maneuver in a group.

Just before entering campus, maybe thirty steps before the gates, a man lying down on the street was in my path. I jumped over him, and continued through the gates.

That was the night, I told my friend. I was shocked by what I did, the brutal casualness of looking the other way. Skipping over that man, I understood: certain lives are valued and certain lives are not.

I grew up in a home where the trauma of the loss of much of my mother's family in the Shoah was present. We felt it mostly in its silence, but it was there. I understood the implications for my mom, and more distantly, for us. I saw the pain in my grandparents' eyes. I understood the history of dehumanizing others.

But that personal experience of looking away, realizing *you are participating* in a system of saying, "these lives matter, these do not," that's how I woke up. That's when I fully noticed the brokenness, and felt responsible to call it out.

Just a few blocks up the street, exactly 30 years earlier, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty. . . morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings."

Our communities and our nation are on fire. It's heartbreaking how much brokenness there is right now. To be honest, I considered a d'var Torah today in which I said, simply, "notice the brokenness." *Dayenu*. Then we'd sit in silence. It's not that that's all we can hold; *it's that we need to be reminded that human pain and suffering, not politics or platitudes of truth, is the heart of our concern.*

Still, there has to be space for reflection, writing, and conversation.

There has to be space to talk about the relentless efforts that people are making toward equality and justice in our nation. There has to be space to acknowledge the acts of support, collaboration, and positive interaction among law enforcement, political officials and people of color in neighborhoods across the country. There are so many people trying to make this nation better, more equitable, fairer, kinder.

But it's too easy, and too tempting, to tell ourselves stories of progress and justice without checking them, holding them to the light, where they can be seen, revealing and exposing deeper layers of truth.

What we see is that too often, by too many, black lives are not treated with dignity.

We see that too often, by too many, our criminal justice system fails to treat African-Americans with integrity.

This failure is not only one of justice and equality, but basic human decency and empathy.

This failure is what enables excessive and deadly force to be used against African Americans and people of color.

From a Jewish perspective, as you might imagine, this is a devastating reality. Our ancient rabbis understood that *valuing lives differently* was an existential threat to Jews and to humanity.

A man came to Rava, a fourth century rabbi, and asked him, “the governor of my town asked me to kill someone. If I refuse, I will be killed. What do I do?”
Rava responded: “be killed. You think your blood is redder than his?”

It’s a shocking text.

I wonder, for a person with his knee on another person’s throat, what he might do differently if told: “you think your blood is redder than his? It’s not. Take your own life before you take his.”

Man, it is so painful. How many times do we humans need to be told that we are all made in the image of God, and therefore all human life must be treasured, honored and revered?

There’s nothing easy about any of this. This is a hard conversation. It’s hard to look out the window and see a world on fire.

The thing about fire, though, is that you can transfer its energy towards another source of light and heat. That’s the task in front of us - not extinguishing, but transferring the fire to emblazon compassion, kindness, generosity, love, solidarity. As with all worthy tasks, it’s a treacherous and frail path, *this transformation of the purpose of fire*.

This past week, I found myself repeatedly turning to the prophet Jeremiah, whose prophecy spanned both the exile of the Israelite people after the destruction of the holy sites in Jerusalem, *and* their return.

Jeremiah stands in this fragile balance of history, tightrope walking along a wire of terror and hope, violence and peace, exile and return, alienation and togetherness, suffocation and comfort.

What makes Jeremiah so special is that he distrusted his own prophetic voice, so his words often express, simply, how he is feeling. At the point of exile of the people, his heart suffers and he wails.

וַיִּרְכָּב וַיִּמְעַלְלֵיךְ עָשׂוּ אֱלֹהֵי לְךָ זֹאת רָעַתְךָ כִּי מָר כִּי נִגַע עַד־לְבָבְךָ:

Our acts have brought this upon us; This is so painful and bitter; It pierces our hearts.

מְעִי מְעִי אוֹחִילָה קִירוֹת לְבִי הִמָּה-לִּי לְבִי לֹא אֶחְרִישׁ כִּי קוֹל שׁוֹפָר שְׂמַעְתָּ נַפְשֵׁי תְרוּעַת
מִלְחָמָה:

Oh, the suffering, the suffering! How we agonize! Oh, the walls of our hearts! Our hearts moan within us.

We cannot be silent; For our souls hear the voice of horns, cries of pain of conflict.

רְאִיתִי אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה-תֵהוּ וְנָהוּ וְאֶל-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאִין אוֹרָם:

I look at the earth, It is unformed and void; At the skies, And their light is gone.

רְאִיתִי הַהָרִים וְהִנֵּה רַעְשִׁים וְכָל-הַגְּבָעוֹת הִתְקַלְקְלוּ:

I look at the mountains, They are quaking; And all the hills are rocking.

...

And then, later, as the political context changes and the people are about to return:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תִמְרוּרִים רַחַל מִבְּכָה עַל-בָּנֶיהָ מֵאֲנָה לְהַנְחִים
עַל-בָּנֶיהָ כִּי אֵינָנו:

A cry is heard — wailing, bitter weeping— a mother weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted, for her children, who are gone.

כֹּה | אָמַר ה' מִנְעִי קוֹלְךָ מִבְּכִי וְעֵינַיִךָ מִדְּמָעָה ...:

Restrain your voice from weeping, Your eyes from shedding tears;

וַיִּשְׂתַּקְוָה לְאַחֲרִיתֶךָ נְאֻם-ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגִבּוֹלָם

for there is hope for your future —declares Adonai: Your children shall return to their homes.

We stand where Jerermiah stood, on the precipice. How do we help the world lean towards restoration, hope and return to justice?

We need to examine our own biases, conscious and unconscious.

We need to recognize and confront the inequity and injustice that is the legacy of slavery, of Jim Crow, and of the disproportionate incarceration of African-Americans, and challenge the horrifying untruths about African-Americans that have been used to justify or rationalize their oppression.

We need to hope, to pray for a better future. Hope is where so much of Jewish faith dwells. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: "Judaism is humanity's faith in the future tense; the Jewish voice is the voice of an inextinguishable hope."

As a shul, as a spiritual community at Reyim, I hope that we can build relationships with African-American churches, to acknowledge their pain, to hear about the conversations they now have with their children, and to stand together when others may try to divide us. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote from his Birmingham jail cell:

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

I have reached out to the pastors of our neighboring black churches to express concern, love, kindness and compassion. If you would like to join in this effort, please send me a note.

We are also called on now for spiritual resiliency.

Resiliency against hopelessness.

Resiliency to reclaim and redirect our own feelings of anger and hatred of those we see as hateful towards peaceful protest, teaching, and passionate advocacy for justice.

Reflecting on this moment in our lives, I was taken back to my college study of the Harlem Renaissance, and the eerily prescient image painted by the great author and activist James Baldwin:

"It demands great spiritual resilience," he wrote, "not to hate the hater *whose foot is on your neck*, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your child to hate."

That will need to be our work going forward.

There can be no limit to our compassion, kindness and love, both within and beyond our Jewish community.

And so as Jews we grieve with the families of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Botham Shem Jean, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner, among so many other African Americans and people of color.

El Maleh Rachamim, God full of compassion, may they rest *b'shalom*, in peace.

May their families find comfort.

And may we be relentlessly awake.

Amen.

Shabbat shalom.