

Yom Kippur 5781
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Teshuva as a Frame for Antiracism

These are the hardest hours of Yom Kippur. Whether or not we are physically abstaining from food and drink, our bodies are tired. We have spent many hours reflecting and naming our failings - we feel vulnerable. Yom Kippur is a marathon and in many ways, our past several months have been as well .

Have you heard of the term “surge capacity?”¹ Surge capacity kicks in when we humans need an extraordinary burst of energy to cope with intense stress, like during a natural disaster. Early in the pandemic - we surged! We quickly made monumental, necessary changes to our lives. Six months later, that bonus of strength is depleted, but the demands and sacrifices continue. We feel increasingly vulnerable, fatigued by personal struggles and national turmoil that just keeps building.

Yet it is precisely from this tired, uncomfortable place, this Yom Kippur place, that we see and feel most clearly the brokenness in ourselves and our society.

This time of year provides us an opportunity to bear witness to these places of brokenness - to see what is broken and what we have to fix. Judaism calls this Teshuvah, from the Hebrew word “to return” - and it is our central task during these ten holy days and beyond. We acknowledge the moments when we made a Cheit or an Aveirah, where we missed the mark or crossed a line, and then we do Teshuvah - we turn, we change, we make choices that help us re-turn to the people we want to be and know we can be. Turning us towards the vision of the world we want to live in and commit to building one step at a time.

Teshuva is a multi-step process and the path is not linear - it’s a complex web of fits and starts as we try and fail, learn and grow, push forward, fall back and try again. Our tradition does not

¹ <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c>

define us as sinners, rather we are Ivrim - Hebrews - Wanderers - a people striving to live up to the holy ideals that God inspires in us and that we set for ourselves.

On this Yom Kippur, I want to speak to a particular communal *cheit* - a way in which we have missed the mark. I want to name an *aveirah* - a line we crossed a long time ago.

I want to talk about the systemic racism that has been pumped into the groundwater of American society for much of our country's past, and continues in our present. We have looked away for far too long. Now is the time for Teshuva, for turning full face to the challenges, and beginning the long road towards repentance and change.

One summer at Camp Newman, the URJ camp in Northern California, a camper briefly went missing. It happens... don't sue me. As Unit Head, I put out the call to staff on the walkie talkie: "Look for a ten-year-old boy, kind of tall, wearing a blue sweatshirt." What did I *NOT* say? "He's Black." When I was asked later why I left out that helpful piece of information, I could only muster this excuse: "I didn't want to call a camper "black" over the walkie for everyone to hear." Growing up in a so-falsely-called "colorblind world," I had internalized a hesitancy about publicly naming a person's skin color. But if we teach our children not to say the word black, not to see skin color as just another benign aspect of a person, if even as adults we are tongue-tied about race — we turn the color of someone's skin into a taboo, and we too sustain racism.

Covert, overt, and even unconscious acts and systems of racism deprive Black people of their humanity, their success, and sometimes, even their lives. The statistics are jaw-dropping:

The 2016 median net worth of an American black family was one tenth the median net worth of a white family.² In Boston, the median net worth for a Black family is eight dollars. You heard that correctly - eight dollars.³

² <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>

In 2016, Black and Latinx individuals made up 56% of the prison population, double their proportion in the US population. The disparity exists within sentencing length as well - **non-violent** drug offenders who are Black serve sentences of similar duration to **violent** criminals who are White.⁴

In 2013-2014, Black students were four times as likely than white students to be suspended from public schools,⁵ and continue to be far less likely to encounter a teacher who looks like them, especially in universities.

Our education system is calibrated not to teach the average American child, but rather the “average” **White** American child. Most students never learn the true history of slavery and its after-effects. Schools with majority Black populations are appallingly underfunded. Stories of stereotyping and the lack of opportunity permeate our educational institutions - including here in Needham.

To make matters worse, when we try to address racial inequity, our attempts often improve conditions for White people more than Black people.

We offer tax cuts we hope will bolster the economy, but those tax cuts often end up slashing the budgets that provide direct funding to underserved communities.

For each of these statistics, an explanation can be found that removes or sidelines race as a central aspect of the problem. But that sidelining **is** part of the problem. When we argue away socioeconomic gaps or treatment of students without addressing the role race and bias play, we allow racism to fester.⁶

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<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/12/11/that-was-typo-the-median-net-worth-black-bostonians-really/ze5kxC1jJelx24M3pugFFN/story.html?event=event12>

⁴ Kendi, 24.

⁵ Kendi 45.

It is a fact we cannot deny - Black Americans experience significant inequity. And our policy solutions to address that inequity are themselves not equal. This is the larger brokenness our societal discourse terms “systemic racism.”

As we sheltered in place this summer, we witnessed the horrific murder of George Floyd, following on the heels of the brutal murders of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. As the list of murdered Black Americans grew, we watched in horror and we woke up. We realized that black lives matter is not a political statement but rather a statement of fact. We stopped shrugging it off or finding excuses. We turned and looked at American racism in all its ugliness, in all its complicated, intertwined issues of history, politics, prejudice, economics, and inequality. We woke up and realized, finally, that we have sinned too. That we are part of the problem. And that we now need to be part of the change.

What I call societal Teshuva - a turn to safety and equity for all Americans -- professor and public intellectual Dr. Ibram X. Kendi calls: enacting antiracist policy. He defines antiracist policy as any measure - written or unwritten, legal or social - that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups.⁷ And just like Teshuvah, supporting and enacting antiracist policy requires both internal and external action.⁸

I cannot do Teshuvah by sitting back and hoping for the best. I can't do Teshuvah by cheering on other people from the sidelines. I can't do Teshuvah by reading a book on what I've done wrong. I have to **make** Teshuvah by going to the people I have wronged, seeking forgiveness, and doing my own internal work to ensure that I do not make the same mistake again.

Similarly, I cannot become an antiracist by sitting back and thinking about racism in America, or feeling sad when I see the news headlines or videos, or even by reading a book. I become an

⁶ Oluo, 18

⁷ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, 18.

⁸ Kendi, 24.

antiracist by challenging my assumptions, reflecting upon my silence, speaking up when I see unjust situations or policies in the world around me, and speaking out for active change.

The work is heavy, and it often feels overwhelming. But if we break it down into small steps, change is possible. And each step matters.

We might begin by unpacking our biases and becoming aware of them, engaging in the work of Teshuvah by turning and turning over our implicit assumptions until they become explicit - as painful as that may be. This means questioning the biases we consume and have consumed from media, our education, our families, and the world around us. It means noticing the voices or stories we haven't heard, and committing ourselves to deep listening. This deep questioning may fundamentally challenge our core narrative of the world around us - at a time we already feel challenged. And yet, it is the least we can do when so many Black people, including members of this community, live these experiences every single day.

But it is not only about our biases - it is also about who is affected by the way our biases play out in the world. Bias becomes dangerous when it intersects with power. Some of us have explicit power over others as bosses, parents or leaders, or we may have implicit power through status. But **all of us** have the power to step up, say something, be an advocate, and express hard truths to those we love and care about and to those we may not know so well.

For example... If I am in a position to influence someone younger than me, how do I use my learning and awareness to expand their perspective and understanding around race? What words do I use? What books do I read? What movies do we watch? What businesses do we frequent? What areas of Boston do we visit?

If I have influence in my place of work, can I push for us to recruit new hires from a more diverse network of schools and professional organizations? Can we order our office lunches

from Black and Brown owned restaurants and caterers? Can I notice who is being given promotions and raises and ensure there is racial equity in opportunity?

To help guide us, we might ask ourselves a question offered by author Ijeoma Oluo, “Who doesn’t have the opportunity to enjoy this privilege I am enjoying now? What can I do to change that reality?”⁹

Here’s the good news: You do not need to confront these challenging realities alone.

Temple Beth Shalom is committed to learning, reflecting, and taking action around race and racial justice. *We proudly included our name alongside over 600 Jewish organizations across the country, representing nearly half of the Jews in America, in a recent statement that said with pride and full voice that unequivocally - Black Lives Matter.* Nearly two hundred of you have joined us for our conversations so far. If you haven’t joined but are interested or want to talk more, please - reach out to me. Check out our new racial justice learning resources page on the TBS website, and be on the lookout for upcoming opportunities for engagement. We want you here - to contribute to our community of deep curiosity and openness, and to take concrete action steps to change, including changes to our own practices, our own spending, our own language and more.

As welcoming as we are here at TBS, we too have work to do. Black members of our community have shared the painful story of being asked if they were new or a visitor when they came to a program or service, even though they had belonged to TBS for many years. In Needham too, the stories are numerous and disheartening. The Lived Experiences Needham project has collected dozens and dozens of stories of racial profiling and racism occurring in our community. As one teenager shares, “I have had people scream white power at me during football games and behind my back when leaving school.” This happens here. And it needs to stop.

⁹ Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk about Race?*, 69.

Teshuvah is hard. It can be painful. Becoming an antiracist is hard. It can be painful. But both are worth it. Our first step is confession, acknowledgement of our failings. We confess in the plural to give each other strength and support and hope. We confess in the plural because we are all responsible for rooting out the evils of racism.

Please join me in these confessions - adapted from the words of Yavilah McCoy, a prominent Black Jewish activist:¹⁰

- Al cheit shechatanu - For the sins of racism we have committed through creating hierarchies of value between our siblings from Europe and those from the Middle East and Africa.
- Al cheit shechatanu - For the sins we have committed through racist words and acts of racial micro-aggression.
- Al cheit shechatanu - for the sin we committed by looking away, by hardening our hearts, by sighing and moving on.
- Al cheit shechatanu - For the sin we have committed by enabling a system that faults law enforcement for property damage, but not for killing a young woman in her own apartment.
- V'al cheit shechatanu - For the sins we have committed in not honoring and protecting the journeys of Jewish souls in Black bodies.

Slach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu. Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Confession begins our process, but our path of Teshuvah has just begun. We continue toward restoration and repair. The path of Teshuvah for ourselves and our nation charts a noble vision - not an easy vision but a necessary one: a world of racial equity, a world borne out by our sacred text, a world that acknowledges the inherent divinity, the inherent *tzelem* found at the core of each human being.

¹⁰ https://www.truah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Al_Chet_for_Racism_Yavilah_McCoy.pdf

On this Yom Kippur, even in our weariness, we commit to action, we commit to learning, we commit to changing how we think and live in our world.

We strive for change because our Torah demands it. Because there are holy, God-given souls crying out in anguish. Because we cannot ignore this reality. We are tired, yes, but let us be determined and resilient. Black tennis great Arthur Ashe wrote, "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can." Let us start here. Let us allow ourselves to be in process. Let us strengthen one another. Let us walk this holy path together.

Gmar Chatima Tova - May each of you be blessed with life and strength in this new year.