

Seeing Racism  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776  
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I was out to dinner with a guy, a friend of mine. And as single people often do, we found ourselves sharing and comparing our latest tales about dating. But there was one anecdote that my friend shared that got me worked up.

He had a first date with a woman – someone he had met online. And before this first date, speaking with her on the phone, he kindly offered to pick her up to take her to dinner. She declined his offer. When he was telling me this story, he was annoyed. “I’m so clearly not dangerous. I’m a good guy,” he said.

And as I sat there listening, his story got under my skin. Why? Because, almost every message women get about how to carry ourselves whether dating or professionally or in public, is a message of caution. Don’t walk home alone at night. Carry pepper spray. Keep an eye on your drink. Be careful what message your clothes convey. We exist in a culture in which women are told in ways subtle and not so subtle that they must protect their bodies.

At first, I was frustrated with him for not getting it, for missing the point that it has nothing to do with him. But I realized – he doesn’t hear these messages about protecting one’s body in the same way. I can’t be angry at him for not knowing what it feels like to have to be constantly aware of your body. It’s just not part of his reality.

That same week, I happened to be reading Ta-nehisi Coates’ book *Between the World and Me*, an extended letter from a Black father to his son about what to anticipate from the world as a black man. So much of the book focuses on the feeling of insecurity of the black body – and the world of threats to it. He moves beyond the advances marked by Oprah and Obama... and identifies that there’s still something fundamentally different about the Black experience in America. The differences happen in moments subtle and not so subtle, but Coates makes them real.

He paints a reality with which I had no personal experience. The fear that an encounter with the police may end in violence. The caution around expressing anger because others will perceive it as dangerous. The awareness of dress and what one’s attire signals to others in how they can treat you. That last one did

sound a bit familiar to me as a woman. For women, it's the length of our skirts. For black men, it's hoodies and baggie jeans.

And then it dawned on me. Here I was, frustrated at my friend for not understanding the experience of women. But there are things about being black in America that I will never know firsthand and therefore, don't think about too terribly much. It simply is not part of my reality. My friend with the dating conundrum may have had a blind-spot to the reality of others, but so did I.

Like every person in this sanctuary, I abhor racism. But I was beginning to understand that what racism actually looks like... what it actually entails.... my understanding of that... needed to evolve.

And so when the Reform movement called on rabbis to stand in solidarity with Black Americans in a march, a march organized after nine people were killed worshipping on June 17<sup>th</sup>, of this year at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, I answered that call. The Reform movement had hoped for 40 rabbis to march – one for each of the 40 days. Over 150 Reform rabbis answered that call and showed up – each of us taking a 20+ mile leg of the march going all the way from Selma, Alabama to Washington D.C.

I went expecting an experience a la Abraham Joshua Heschel – the rabbi who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. In Selma, Alabama. The rabbi, who famously said that he felt as though he were praying with his feet. I didn't anticipate fire hoses or police dogs... but racist signs, resentful law enforcement.... Yeah. I did expect that.

My leg started in Augusta, Georgia. I arrived late on Friday night and set up my cot alongside the dozens of others sleeping in a college gym. Some had been marching since Selma and were going all the way to D.C. Others had just joined for a day or two.

In the morning, we lined up... two by two. And started marching. A bus met us every 3 miles if we needed a rest... and a Torah was passed among all the marchers – Jewish and non – for every last step of the way. Over the course of the day, we lined up next to different people, learned new stories.

More than once, white residents would come out of their homes to watch us pass. Expressionless. Staring. And it made me nervous. I braced for the jeers. But my inner optimist won... and I stuck my hand up in the air, started waving and smiling (probably a little too enthusiastically). And, thank God, the waving and the smiling were reciprocated. I heard a few stories about hate mongers on other legs of the

march who came out to yell their racist rhetoric. But they were few and far between. The exception, not the rule.

It became clear that I wasn't there to fight the same pervasive, overt racism of the 1960's. Yes, that still exists— in public among radicals, and sometimes, in polite company, behind closed doors. But that's not what I was seeing on this march. That's not what I was there to fight. So what was I doing?

Well, the white faces that came out to greet us were cordial and friendly. The black faces that came out to greet us were ecstatic. Prayerful. Grateful. Joyful. Moved. About 16 miles in, we walked past a Popeye's Chicken that had shut its doors for the entire staff, all of whom were black, to come out and watch us march by... with one hand in the air and one hand over their hearts praising God for our presence. I was shocked... by how much this meant to them.

I can't speak for those folks that we passed by, but I had the sense that they felt seen. This march spoke to something deeply true in the experience of many black Americans that the White bystanders don't get. That I don't get. As some of the black marchers explained to me, at best, they have a feeling of being invisible to society—overlooked and unimportant. At worst, it is a feeling that our society sees them as a danger and treats them accordingly.

This point was driven home for me when a black man, the son of a police officer, told me that he does not remember his father ever giving him the talk about the birds and the bees. But he does remember the lesson about what to do when you get stopped by the police. Put your hands up. Follow instructions. Announce before you make any movement. Make sure they give you permission.

At a rally one night of the march, a preacher explained the evolution of civil rights from the 1960's on through the gestures of the protestors. "We began our protest like this, (holding up a peace sign), he said. Then we moved on to this (hold up a black fist). Now, we protest like this (hands held in surrender mode)." This final gesture – is a request, a plea. "I am not a threat. Please see me."

What became clear to me on this march is that this is not a conversation about hate.... about racism emerging from a place of loathing. This is a conversation about recognizing what we do not see. It is a conversation about our own blind spots.

When the phrase "Black Lives Matter" caught on earlier this year... there was backlash. Some people countered that it's not only black lives that matter, all lives matter. Yes. That is very true. But saying

black lives matter isn't saying that all lives don't. It's highlighting a particular issue that needs more attention. That needs to be seen. When I'm promoting awareness of breast cancer with pink ribbons or my friend is promoting awareness of prostate cancer by sporting a mustache in November, it's not to say that other forms of cancer don't matter. It's simply placing attention on a particular disease that is both deeply prevalent and yet often overlooked.

Some people were turned off by the phrase "Black Lives Matter" because our gut response is to say that this is too simplistic. Of course black lives matter. Aren't we past that?

But as I saw the people lined up outside of Popeye's, the answer was clearly... no. We're not past that. There is a fundamental need to affirm the value of black lives because enough people feel that they are not valued. You may disagree with tactics taken by people who use this phrase. That's fine. I'm not sold on some of the actions myself. But the phrase itself – black lives matter – that is a request to be seen.

If that point were not already driven home for me, this weekend, it became even more real. One of the two men leading the march, a man named Middle Passage– a 68- year old disabled veteran who vowed to march every step of the way from Selma to D.C, the man who stood at the front of the march carrying an American flag over his shoulder the entire way. – did not get to carry out his wish. Because he died this weekend. A few days shy and a few miles short of Washington D.C. So passionate was he about this mission to proclaim the need for a new civil rights movement, that he gave his final days to the cause. It appears that no.... we are not beyond "black lives matter" as our starting point.

In many ways, this is a harder issue to tackle than the overt, pervasive racism of the 1960's. How do you fight something that many people can barely see?

The Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas explains the first step. "There is a commandment in the face of the other... as if [God] has spoken to me." Once I look at you... look you in the eye, I can no longer ignore you. I am compelled to react to you. To speak to you. To answer you. If you are not experiencing the problem yourself, it is a choice to see. Looking away, that's an easier choice. But once we make that choice to see, we have no choice but to act. Looking you in the eye compels me to act. "There is a commandment in the face of the other... as if [God] has spoken to me."

So how do we see? If you are black, the more you share your stories, the more this reality comes to light. To allow for and even invite those moments of discomfort for you that come with making others uncomfortable.

If you are not black, in order to build a culture of seeing, – the most consistent advice that I have received is to seek articles and books by black voices about black experiences. I need to wrestle with ideas and experiences that my whiteness prevents me from knowing firsthand. The more that white people know how this subtle racism manifests in the classroom and in the board room, at the grocery store and on screen, the more capable we become of speaking up when we see it. The most interesting (and frankly uncomfortable) advice I received on the march... “don’t feel guilty for being white. Your whiteness is an asset when speaking about these problems because whether you like it or not, people are more likely to pay attention when you speak about these issues.”

All of us have a role to play....because once we as individuals, as a society, start to see, we can start a more serious conversation about how to actually address these inequalities at their root causes –not on partisan politics but on the shared value of human dignity. Once we as a society start to see, we won’t be able to brush off issues like criminal justice and prison reform – issues that one prominent intellectual, identifies as the new incarnation of Jim Crow. This is not about accusing or attacking those who put their lives on the line in law enforcement. It’s about all of us as a society taking responsibility for our collective blind spots.

As we will read in Torah on second day Rosh Hashanah, Isaac was not saved from his near sacrifice until his father Abraham lifted his eyes to see the ram. He first had to get out of his own narrowness – open his eyes in order to see that a different reality was possible.

That first moment of seeing... that moment is what links all movements for human dignity.

God did not move to help us, the Israelites, our enslaved ancestors – until our voices cried out – demanding to be seen. America’s empathy for the civil rights movement did not build until televisions projected images of attacking dogs and egregious beatings. The brutality had to be seen. Today, systems that perpetuate racial inequality will not be eradicated until they are first brought to light. Until we choose to see. Because there is a commandment in the face of the other. As if [God] has spoken to me.

Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha’olam – pokeach ivrim. Blessed are you, Adonai our God, eternal power in space and time, who opens the eyes from blindness. Amen.