

Rosh Hashanah, 2nd day
September 15, 2015

I want to share an event that occurred many years ago, at an occasion in New York which attracted a large minority population. At this occasion, marchers confronted residents of a building who had thrown things at them during the procession, including chemical-soaked rags. When the police responded, one paper reported, “Men were flung down, women were dragged out by arms and shoulders and pushed headlong down the street.” Inspector Adam Cross, the official in charge of the police detail, instructed his men, “Club their brains out.”

Eyewitnesses reported police pursued and attacked several people as they tried to escape, and at least two would claim that officers choked them in patrolwagons. Another paper on the scene reported, “[The words] ‘Lynch them! Those animals! Those dogs!’, [could be] heard from all sides.” One woman, who was arrested and lectured by a judge, told the judge, “We don’t riot,” “But if all we did was weep at home, nobody would notice it; so we have to do something to help ourselves.”

In 1908, New York police commissioner Theodore Bingham called it

“astounding that with a million” of one race living in New York, “perhaps half of the criminals should be of that race.” The race he was talking about was “Hebrews.” And the unrest I mentioned occurred in 1902, at the funeral of a prominent rabbi on the Lower East Side. It doesn’t take much imagination to make the link to African Americans in later decades.

There is no better day than Rosh Hashanah to talk about issues surrounding race in America. Today we celebrate the birthday of the world, by tradition the anniversary of God’s creation of the human being. We all know that famous phrase, *b’tzelem elohim bara otam*, In the image of God did God create [the first two human beings.] We also know that too many young Black men are dying. This is true in our inner cities in general, but we also have a new awareness of those who have been killed by the police, in Ferguson, Charleston, Staten Island, Baltimore. Some of these actions seemed clearly unfair and malicious; some the facts were very hazy. But it is hard to deny there is a problem. Our souls yearn to get back to that authentic human state in which every

person is truly treated as the image of God.

But the ugly truth is that state is not so authentic and not so natural. As soon as human beings leave the Garden of Eden, the first thing that happens is two brothers are born, and one of them kills the other. A few weeks ago, I participated in a Rabbinical Assembly phone conference on the concept of tzelem elohim, being in the image of God. Richard Cohen, of the Southern Poverty Law Center, told us that basic sociology underscores some of the difficulties of learning how to “play well with others.” The distinguished scholar Robert Putnam, famous for the book *Bowling Alone*, has found that as diversity in society increases, the number of people who say they trust their neighbors goes down. This is even if their neighbors themselves are from the same ethnic group as they are. Says Putnam: “Diversity brings out the turtle in us.” In the last few decades in America, there has been a large increase in the number of hate groups. There are now about 800. A further troubling statistic: while Black Americans see gains for Blacks as adding to society, Whites tend to see those gains as coming at White expense.

Yet, as Rev. Barry Black, chaplain of the Senate, suggested during the panel, diversity is a religious value. Kohelet says:

טובים השנים מן־האחד אשר יש־להם שכר טוב בעמלם: י כִּי אִם־יָפֹל הָאֶחָד יָקִים
אֶת־חֲבֵרוֹ וְאִילוֹ הָאֶחָד שָׁיֵפוֹל וְאֵין שֶׁנִּי לְהַקִּימוֹ:

Two are better off than one, in that they have greater benefit from their labor. ¹⁰For should they fall, one can raise the other; but woe betide him who is alone and falls with no companion to raise him!¹

When they have God with them -- when they remember that they are created in the image of God -- וְהַחוּטֵי הַמְּשֻׁלָּשׁ לֹא בְמַהֲרָה יִנְתָּק -- “the threefold cord is not readily broken.” And we as individuals, as Jews, and as people of good will must take the initiative in healing rifts in our society, even if we might think others should do it first. Yesterday and today we read the story of Abraham. Rev. Black pointed out that when Lot’s shepherds and Abraham’s come in conflict, Abraham takes the

¹ Jewish Publication Society. (1985). *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Ec 4:9–10). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

initiative in resolving the dispute, even though as the elder, Lot really should have come to him.

When it comes to police shootings, I have to tell you that I am in awe of police officers and what they do. I am nervous being an armchair judge of when they have acted unreasonably or with bias. But there is also a problem which has been with us for some time. Rev. Black himself -- a retired Rear Admiral -- described how years ago he was visiting a friend in a White neighborhood in California and ended up spread eagle on the ground when a couple of police officers answered the call of a "suspicious black man" in the neighborhood. When the policemen discovered he was a naval officer, they apologized profusely, but you get the idea. The other day James Blake, a leading American tennis player who is now retired, was slammed to the ground by white officers in Manhattan because he looked like an ID theft suspect. Certainly, it would be reasonable for the police to question him after he was mistakenly identified by a victim, but the level of force in these stories often seems unnecessary. This is not someone else's problem.

As I said a moment ago, there was a time when Jews were the victims. It is important to also remember the growing direct affect this will have on *our* Jewish community, too. More and more of us have black children and grandchildren, and now must worry about how to protect their children from being racially profiled.

I am one who likes to believe the biggest racial barriers are behind us. But -- even if that is true -- the legacy of the double standard remains in ways we may not always think about. When our soldiers came home from World War II, they got numerous benefits, of which perhaps the most important was the G. I. Bill. That legislation subsidized college for tens of thousands of veterans, and gave help with mortgages and other needs. But Black veterans did not benefit from these things nearly as much as white ones. Of 67,000 mortgages taken out on the G. I. bill, fewer than 100 were taken out by African Americans. And white officials who had the power to say who qualified for the G.I. bill often favored whites, especially in the south. Blacks were excluded from many universities, and often needed more education

before they qualified for college. I don't have to tell you how essential the G.I. Bill was in making many families middle class, many Jews -- and we, our parents, and grandparents -- among them. A recent article in the Atlantic is entitled, "The Case for Reparations." I know that is a controversial subject, but at the very least, we have an obligation to put large amounts of money into education and other services in inner city neighborhoods. But exactly the opposite is happening, and minority school districts sometimes have barely enough money to function, let alone provide things like music and art.

So the question is, what do we do? The first thing is that we recognize that everybody profiles. We are not so far from those police officers, who may also not be consciously racist. Do we move our purse in an elevator when standing next to a black kid, but not for a white kid similarly dressed? As I said on Yom Kippur last year, a very high percentage of young black men are in prison. The need for reform of the penal system is urgent. And it is often not taken seriously. After the escape of Matt and Sweat from Clinton Prison, prisoners had their rights

violated by angry guards, almost with impunity. Some years ago, there were flourishing prison college programs. Then Congress decided prisoners should not have the right to Pell grants, and most of these programs dried up. The history of racism in America, I believe, makes such programs a priority even though I know many people outside of jail have trouble paying for university. Stand up for penal reform! Some have called for a “truth and justice reconciliation commission” to air the history of hostility between black communities and the police. And I would urge all of us to take the slogan “Black lives matter” seriously. Of course, all lives matter, but if we seek recognition of the unique travails of the Jewish people, we must do the same for the black experience in America.

Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster, also on the panel a few weeks ago, mentioned that most of us were raised to believe -- and raise our children to believe -- that people are really all the same. It sounds good, but children very quickly realize it is not true, for they see that people are simply not treated the same. So she says that what many of us are

doing now -- in the wake of the Charleston massacre, and police shootings like Ferguson, is having to unlearn that narrative. May we work to unlearn it, but then to relearn the essence of Torah, that all human beings are b'tzelem elohim, created in God's image. Let us build bridges with communities of color, aggressively support prison reform, May we invest in minority communities, and fight the racial profiling which might even threaten our own children. Let us fight for the great truth the Talmud says, "The human being was created alone, for the sake of peace among people, so that one person might not say to another, "My father was greater than yours."