

In December of 2010, Temple Reyim in Newton hosted a remarkable event: on the sixth night of Hanukkah, they gathered for the first time ever all of the “first” women rabbis in one room together.

Rabbi Sally Priesand, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Rabbi Amy Eilberg, and Rabba Sara Hurwitz, the first-ordained North American Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative women rabbis and Open Orthodox rabba stood on a stage together and told their stories, their journeys to the rabbinate. I had been ordained less than a year prior, and as a newly-minted rabbi, it was an incredibly powerful event. At the end, all of the women rabbis in the audience were invited to the bimah to join together in lighting the menorah and singing the Hanukkah blessings. I recall looking around the stage and feeling an overwhelming sense of awe. I marveled at the women who had birthed a revolution sharing space with so many who had benefited from the fruits of their labor.

Of course, these four women didn't actually birth the revolution, any more than Rosa Parks started the Civil Rights movement. We give them credit because they are the most visible actors, but it was the cumulative hard work of so many that brought us to where we are today.

In addition to lighting the Hanukkah candles, there was one other moment that night that is indelibly imprinted in my memory. It came immediately after Rabbi Amy Eilberg told her story, in which she credited Rabbi Al Axelrod from Brandeis for pushing her to become a rabbi. When she finished, all three other

women on the stage shared the names of the male rabbis who encouraged them to pursue ordination. These men held open the door to the rabbinate to them, even though it often came at a price for their own careers.

The event was called “Raising Up The Light” - and we are right to raise up the lights of these incredibly brave, pioneering women. We can easily imagine the generations of parents who dreamt of more for their daughters; but it is easy to forget that it took many male allies to help those women achieve their shared goal. No amount of Talmudic knowledge, pastoral compassion, or community organizing would have been enough without the men who controlled the institutions being willing to throw open the doors, to cede some of their power, and to share the spotlight.

I’ll be the first to tell you that nearly fifty years after Rabbi Priesand was ordained, we still have a long way to go. The #MeToo movement is a reminder that the door is not all the way open - and that passing the threshold is only the first step toward equality. There are double-standards too numerous to list that are applied to a woman in the rabbinate but not a man; offenses, both large and small, are committed, often without intent to do harm... but sometimes with it.

But the ground that has been gained in the past fifty years is tremendous and worth celebrating - and any opportunities available now are due to the hard work, dedication, and vision of both women *and* their male allies. And it’s worth lauding those who helped along the way, mostly because of the risks

they took in advocating on behalf of the women who sought equality. The glass ceiling cannot be shattered solely from below; there must also be people stomping on it from above who are willing to risk falling down when the structure collapses.

It could not have been easy for those men to say to their male colleagues, “It’s time we ordained women,” especially when it meant the possibility of being excluded from their own movement for rocking the boat. But rock it they did, and it is because of their bravery that I am even able to speak to you right now.

“Ally” is a word that we hear in multiple contexts these days. At its most basic definition, an ally is someone willing to act with, and for, others in pursuit of equality. The word has been applied to decades of male feminists, and we often hear it used for those who support the rights of LGBTQ+ people. Recently, it has gained steam in the context of how white people can help people of color.

Many of us would consider ourselves allies -- after all, who doesn't want to be helpful and supportive? But the question is not *are we* allies, but rather, what do we *do* as allies? And more importantly, what do we *give up* to be an ally? Allyship is not simply a matter of saying no to sitting on a “Manel” - a speaking panel where all the participants are male (and often white). It’s not about

putting up a yard sign that says, “Black Lives Matter” - although that declaration is valuable in that it helps increase the spread of the message. The true test of allyship is when the ally can examine the power granted to them by a system, and begin to learn how to right the wrongs inherent in that system.

Being an ally for people of color - particularly Black people - means saying that we as a country need to recognize and do teshuva for the sins of our forebears - even though many of our families weren't in the country when those sins were committed. Being an ally is saying that we still benefit from the unbalanced system, and although we cannot undo the pain, the suffering and the tremendous hurt that it has caused through the centuries, we are willing to give up some of our advantages in order to even the playing field. As the author of “So You Want To Talk About Race” wrote,

We live in a society where race is one of the biggest indicators of your success in life... We can get every person in America to feel nothing but love for people of color in their hearts, and unless our systems are acknowledged and changed, it will bring negligible benefit to the lives of people of color.

Whenever I fill out demographic information - on the census, at the doctors office, on school enrollment forms - I check off the box for “white” under race. But the truth is, that’s a recent development for our people. Not many generations ago, we weren’t seen as white. White Supremacists *still* don’t see

us as white. Along with a remarkable number of you, I graduated from Brandeis University - a school founded because Jews weren't seen as white enough to attend Ivy League colleges, at least not without quotas. In so many ways - religion, socio-economic status, language, education - being white is about more than just the color of your skin - and in those instances, we are often found lacking.

Like many of you, I am an Ashkenazi Jew descended from Eastern European Jewish ancestors. For the most part, we Ashkenazim benefit from white privilege... until we don't. We are "conditionally white." In a society where base anti-Semitism is low, the economy is booming, and people are happy, we can assimilate easily into the wider white world. When the opposites are true - anti-Semitism is rampant, families struggle to make ends meet, and society is spiraling downward - we quickly become seen as "other."

Right now, in the vast majority of spaces in our country, Ashkenazi Jews - at least those who do not display their Judaism openly - are able to walk the streets protected by our white skin. But here's the thing: "Conditionally White" is still white, at least for a time. And while we have that privilege, it is our moral responsibility to use it to make space for, and share power with, those who are without. Some say, "But we never owned slaves!" Others point out, "My ancestors were forced from their homes, too!" This is avoiding the issue. The idea that one's ancestors were not directly complicit in creating the system, does not mean we do not benefit from it now. And surely it does not free us from the task of recognizing injustice and working to alleviate it. We

are obligated to help our society do teshuvah, in order to reach our potential as a nation - we don't have the luxury of sitting this one out.

You may be wondering, why now? Why talk about race and ally-ship on Yom Kippur, our holiest day of the year?

Today is a day of reckoning, of Teshuvah, of making whole the things that are broken - not only for ourselves but for our broader community. Who we want to be is only as good as who we are in a wider context. This is the holiest day of the year; doesn't it deserve a holy challenge?

Rabbi Sharon Brous¹ wrote,

We — Jews, people of faith, survivors and descendants of survivors of generational trauma, must join this conversation because it's decent and it's right. Because our destiny, as American Jews, is tied inextricably to the health and wellbeing of this nation, and right now our country is profoundly unwell. [and] Because we know what it means to be on the receiving end of so much cruelty.

The concept of Teshuvah exists because mistakes are inevitable in every relationship, community and society. In granting each other permission to do

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<https://ikar-la.org/wp-content/uploads/RH2-RBrous-Sermon-OUR-COUNTRY-WAS-BUILT-ON-A-STOLEN-BEAM.pdf>

teshuvah, to right wrongs and repair brokenness, we allow dynamic communities to continue to grow. If we could not fix what we broke, we would never move forward as a society. It is only through our collective embracing of the process of teshuvah that we can grant one another forgiveness for the hurts we are carrying and the wrongs that were committed against us.

It is in this spirit that we here at Temple Israel are spending the next year on a journey of listening, learning, and challenging ourselves to examine our own internal biases. Led by Ruth Zakarin and Anabelle Keimach, we will encounter voices and perspectives that have been, in the past, easy to ignore. I assure you: whether or not you think this project is for you... it is. We all have learning to do, myself very much included.

In the long run, the road to a more equitable society starts with each of us individually. Systemic change begins with internal change. And internal change begins with a recognition that things are not well for our siblings of color and that we have the power to make a difference.

At the end of Parshat Shoftim, we encounter an unusual ritual called the Eglah Arufa - literally, the broken-neck calf. The ritual is required when the body of a murder victim is discovered in an unpopulated area, near to, but not in, a city. The citizens of the Jewish city closest to the location where the victim was

found are notified, and they then perform a ceremony that concludes with a prayer for atonement for the crime that has taken place in their midst.

The leaders of the city declare their own innocence by washing their hands over the broken-necked calf in the valley. They recite the words, לֹא שִׁפְכָה יְדֵינוּ, לֹא רָאוּ (שִׁפְכוּ) אֶת-הַדָּם הַזֶּה, וְעֵינֵינוּ, לֹא רָאוּ. "Our hands did not spill this blood and our eyes did not see." The sages ask, "Do we really think that the elders killed him?" No, we don't, but the elders--on behalf of their town--take responsibility for not providing safe roads or catching the perpetrator if he was hiding in their community. They take responsibility for not taking care of the needs of others, needs that should have been obvious but were hidden to them.

But the key here is that the elders of the community can only declare that they are not responsible after a careful accounting to make sure that they are not, in fact, responsible. They must confirm that no one in their town turned away the deceased from shelter; that the roads were safe for passing without an escort; and that they truly do not own any responsibility for the death.

Like the elders, we cannot simply wash our hands of systemic racism because it was not we who caused it. Everyone who benefits from white privilege must take responsibility for their participation in a society that prioritizes one group over another. It is our responsibility to take stock of how our country treats everyone, not just how we - and people like us - are treated. We must open our eyes to what may be obvious to others but is still hidden to us.

Maimonides contends that the goal of the *egla arufa* ritual is entirely about prompting people to talk about the crimes. He hopes that by bringing the existence of the murder to light, by making the event public, the murderer will be found and punished. Solving the underlying problem shifts the entire paradigm from a systemic issue that no one is fixing to a problem that can be named and thus solved. It is precisely those uncomfortable conversations that are the beginnings of a tectonic shift in our culture today.

The massive protests and rallies of this past summer are our modern version of this ritual. Like giving up a calf for this ritual in an agricultural society, the protests come with a high cost - in time, physical and emotional energy, and sometimes even bodily harm. They are a public declaration that says: “Something is deeply wrong and needs to change.”

I spoke at the beginning about how women becoming rabbis is a modern phenomenon. But here’s the thing: women have always been capable of being rabbis, but the Jewish community only came to the conclusion that we should be clergy half a century ago. Likewise, it has taken white people a long time to recognize the injustices that people of color still face in this country. Many still can’t, don’t, or won’t see them.

Former NFL player Emmanuel Acho says in his video series, *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*: “If the white person is your problem, then

only the white person can be your solution.” We might not have been responsible for these injustices, but we are complicit in, and benefit from, the resulting system - and it is our responsibility to work to repair it. Why today? Because today is about setting things right with God, with our fellow people, with ourselves. And we would be lying if we said “Our hands did not spill this blood and our eyes did not see.”

We see it clearly, and by extension of what we accept as normal in our daily lives, we are culpable. Yom Kippur is about asking for forgiveness for our sins - those committed intentionally and unintentionally - and changing our behavior going forward. Teshuvah is necessary in every relationship. Mistakes are inevitable. It is what we do next - after we recognize the hurt - on which we are judged.

May this year be a year of growth and learning for all of us. May we strive to right the wrongs in which we have been complicit. And may we work to make this world a safer, healthier, and happier place for all of our fellow human beings.

G'mar chatimah tovah.