

I thought we were past this.

I grew up hearing stories about anti-war protests, about college exams being canceled because of Kent State, about a changing world. And in a small way, I learned to be part of that change - marching for Soviet Jewry, volunteering at homeless shelters, rallying for peace around the world.

So when I say that I thought we were past this, I mean this: there was a time when I thought we were done fighting the Big Fights. I knew we still had some improvements to make, but at one point, I was naive enough to wonder if my parents' generation had already fought all the wars, leaving my generation to clear the rubble, put out a few small fires, and make America better at a smaller level. Equal rights - not separate but equal, but truly equal - was the prize, and it seemed to me that my peers would get to enjoy living in that place.

And yet.

And yet... today we live in a country where African-Americans make up 12% of the country's population - but black men comprise 37% of America's male prisoners.

And yet... today we live in a country where a white police officer threatening black teenagers at a pool party, choking a black man to death, or shooting an unarmed black man in the back - all caught on video - registers outrage but not surprise.

And yet... today we live in a country where Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, and Eric Garner are remembered not for their lives, but for their deaths. A place where attending Bible study at church can get you killed.

Because apparently, we haven't gotten very far.

And truth be told, while we live in the same country as those people - we also live in a very different world. We weren't overly concerned about surviving shul this morning. From getting here to sitting through services, eating at kiddush to making our way home, we expect to be able to go about our daily lives without really being interrupted - and certainly without being assaulted. Just two generations removed from persecution, genocide, and oppression - just one generation removed from Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. King - American Jews are farther removed than ever from the experiences of blacks in this country.

When the Rabbinical Assembly sent out the press release earlier this week, announcing this Shabbat as a Shabbat of Solidarity with the African American community, they included a few resources. Among them were some classic articles on civil rights from the journal Conservative Judaism. While remarkably moving, these pieces were most striking in showing just how much the world has not changed - with just a few language updates, they could have been printed today.

In spite of the marches; in spite of the laws; in spite of the changing attitudes toward diversity - very little has changed. The Marches from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, FORTY-FIVE years ago, were about the Voting Rights Act. The same issue that is before Congress again today. In 2011, the average white household's net worth was about \$110,000; that year, the average black

household's net worth was just north of \$6,000. Six. Thousand. Dollars. In 150 years since the end of the Civil War, we've gone from 3/5 to 1/18.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, from *The Prophets*:

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception, becoming the rule, and in turn being accepted.

To turn last week's act of terrorism into a conversation about taking down the Confederate flag is to be indifferent to evil. To ignore that black mothers are calling their sons back home from protests because they fear for their lives is to be indifferent to the plague that is sweeping our nation. And to think that a lone wolf perpetrated the brutal attack on the AME Church - hiding among the flock, looking them in the eyes, accepting their hospitality before gunning them down - to think that this was an isolated incident is to bury our heads in the sand and ignore the painful reality:

We have so much work to do.

At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, we are confronted with a strange ritual with no explanation. The only way to purify oneself from the *tumah* of death is to enact an ancient ritual with the red heifer. Unlike other sacrifices, this animal must be taken outside of the camp, slaughtered by a ritually pure priest (in this case, Aaron's son Eleazar) and burned. The ashes of the burnt cow are mixed with water, which is then used for the purification. In the meantime, Eleazar (and anyone who touches this water of lustration) has been made impure by the process.

This ritual has only been enacted 8 times in our entire history and has not been performed in hundreds of years. (Although there is a rumor of a *parah adumah* in New Jersey...) It was so ancient that by time of the Middle Ages rabbis gave up on the concept of *teumah meit* - impurity caused by coming into contact with death - and just assumed that we were all *tamei*, ritually impure.

Digging a little deeper, I want to look at the ritual itself. Unlike other cleansing practices, this one takes place outside the Israelite camp. The camp, or person, or tent, has already been defiled by the presence of death. Both the creation of the purifying waters and the ritual itself all take place outside of the camp. Abarvanel tells us that this is so that those who are outside the camp of the Shekhinah, those who do not yet know God, are able to draw near.

I've often spoken about the meaning of the words *tamei* and *tahor* - usually translated as impure and pure. These translations are a misnomer. A better translation might be "ritually impure" and "ritually pure". But my preferred understanding is "ready" and "not ready". Someone who is *tamei* is not yet ready - not yet ready to rejoin the community, not yet ready to engage intimately with another human being, and not yet ready to approach God in a prayerful way. One

who is *tahor* has gone through the ritual cleansing process and is now ready to engage fully with God and humanity.

The Eitz Chayim chumash, which you have in front of you, quotes a modern commentator who suggests that the ritual's purpose is psychological. To heal a person burdened by a sense of wrong-doing, who feels the purity of his or her soul has been compromised, we take an animal completely without blemish and sacrifice it, as if to imply that perfection does not belong in this world. Perfect creatures belong in heaven; this world is given to the inevitably flawed and compromised.

As unexplainable and unattainable as it was, this ritual was surprisingly easy. Without the presence of a *parah adumah*, we have a much harder time cleansing ourselves spiritually and psychologically. Without a red heifer, we need a new way of readying ourselves, of readying our whole community, to fully engage again, after the death and destruction in Charleston from which we have all been made impure.

The swift and immediate action after the brutal attack, by South Carolina's state legislature to begin the process of possibly taking down the Confederate Flag that flies outside of the building is, on some levels, admirable. The Confederate flag is a very literal symbol of the blood on our hands. The speed at which the flag is being removed from other states capitals, from Walmart, from games sold in the Apple store, and from license plates is astonishing. Ben Jones, a chief of heritage operations for the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a group based in Tennessee, called the flurry "a feeding frenzy of cultural cleansing". He's right. We are seeking a way to cleanse ourselves of this horror and the *tumah* of death. But does

just removing the flag, removing the blood from our hands, actually change the situation?

The desire for a ritual, for a physical change to cleanse ourselves of the presence of death is strong - and it is precisely what the ritual of the *parah adumah* seeks to address. But it would be a mistake to think that taking down the Confederate flag is going to be a panacea. Just as using the waters of the ashes of the red heifer did not solve the underlying issues that caused a person to come into contact with a corpse in the first place, so too removing a flag, even one as divisive as this one, does not eliminate the underlying institutionalized racism in our country.

—————- CONNECTING SENTENCE

We learn from Moshe himself, in this week's parasha, that it is normal to get angry. There is debate among the Torah commentators over what, exactly, was Moses's sin, for which he loses access to the Eretz Canaan. Was it that he hit the rock out of anger, instead of speaking to it? Was it that he didn't trust in, and publicly affirm, God? Or was it that he spoke harshly to the Israelite people, calling them obstinate rebels, reminding them of their past misdeeds, instead of giving them the opportunity to grow past it?

Getting angry is good. Anger happens to all of us. Change happens when we are angry. Allowing our emotions to control our behavior in destructive ways is problematic. Acting violently out of that anger, letting emotion cloud his judgement, and smashing a rock is what lost Moses access to the Promised Land.

We need to learn the lesson that Moses missed - to take our justified anger, our outrage, and our passion, and to channel it towards good. Dr. Susie Tanchel, the Head of School at JCDS, posted on Facebook yesterday that the reason Moses lost the opportunity to enter the Promised Land is clear.

Moses did not affirm God's sanctity in the midst of the people (Num. 20:12). This was a grave enough sin that the finest prophet in all of Jewish history (Deut 34:10) could not fulfill what would have been the goal of leadership tenure. Apparently, it was not enough to affirm God's sanctity in private by doing courageous deed like leading a People out of Egypt and putting up with all their complaints in the desert. A public affirmation matters significantly.

Dr. Tanchel was referring to the affirmation of her marriage that the Supreme Court gave yesterday. She continued to say that the public recognition and resulting dignity that comes with it is immeasurable.

And her words are equally relevant to the grave situation for African Americans in this country. If we do not publicly affirm that acts of terrorism are wrong and that we have a role to play in changing the _____, we take away a measure of dignity.

Martin Buber was once asked by a group of students to give them a dvar torah. He thought for a few minutes and then asked the question, "why are we commanded to 'shema yisrael', to listen?" He answered his own question by saying, "Because this

is the most important thing of all: to hear, to listen. We do not listen. So we are commanded to listen, to hear. If only we were to obey this commandment; if only we were to listen ...”

I know just enough about our country’s history of racism and white privilege to know that I don’t know very much. So I’m inclined to follow Martin Buber’s advice and listen to those who have experienced it and who know much more than I do.

On Twitter last week, Brandeis professor, Chad Williams, created a hashtag called #CharlestonSyllabus. Together with other professors and prominent scholars, he created a syllabus of required reading for anyone who wants to better understand the African American experience in our country - from slavery to the present day.

He wrote:

The Charleston massacre, albeit in the worst imaginable way, opened a blood stained door to this country’s racial history. Would people have the courage to walk through it? Over the course of two days, it became painfully evident that the vast majority of people lacked the necessary historical awareness to engage in serious dialogue about Charleston, much less subject themselves to critical introspection.

The list is overwhelmingly long and deep. And yet, courageous people are walking through that door and learning, listening, and growing.

After Shabbat, I encourage you to search for the term #CharlestonSyllabus and do some of your own listening and exploring.

To give voice to just one of the many voices in the Black community, I want to read a poem by Maya Angelou called Caged Bird, which I'm sure is not new to many of you.

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard

on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Our tradition has always celebrated freedom and, more importantly, _____

One of the most beautiful aspects of Judaism is that we can hold two truths, two emotions at the same time. The Talmud, in Masechket Ketubot (17a) discusses what should happen when a wedding party meets a funeral procession at an intersection. Who should cross first? The rabbis rule that the wedding party goes first, because life trumps death.

Even at our most joyous celebrations, we acknowledge that the world is not yet whole, there is still suffering and tragedy. We break a glass under the chuppah, we diminish wine in our glasses at Pesach, because in Judaism there is no joy without recognition that there is still work to be done.

And so, even though my perspective on Civil Rights in this country shifted a bit yesterday at 10am when the Supreme Court declared that marriage is available to all who seek it across our nation, I know we have not completed the work.

This morning, I hold both joy and deep sadness in my heart. Joy for our families who can now legally unify in all 50 states and deep sadness for the loss of life, the ongoing assault on African-Americans, and the distance we have to traverse to get where our country needs to be.

Shabbat Shalom.

Reverend Clementa Pinckney said, "America....it's really about freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness....And sometimes you gotta make noise to do that, sometimes you maybe have to die.. to do that, sometimes you have to march, struggle, and be unpopular to do that."

Black LIVES matter - because right now, the media seems to be telling us that only black DEATHS matter.

NAME THE 9 PEOPLE WHO WERE KILLED

Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd (54) – Bible study member and manager for the Charleston County Public Library system

Susie Jackson (87) – a Bible study and church choir member

Ethel Lee Lance (70) – the church sexton

Depayne Middleton-Doctor (49) – a pastor who was also employed as a school administrator and admissions coordinator at Southern Wesleyan University

Clementa C. Pinckney (41) – the church pastor and a South Carolina state senator

Tywanza Sanders (26) – a Bible study member

Daniel Simmons (74) – a pastor who also served at Greater Zion AME Church in Awendaw

Sharonda Coleman-Singleton (45) – a pastor; also a speech therapist and track coach at Goose Creek High School

Myra Thompson (59) – a Bible study teacher

From the Eitz Chayim chumash - "Israel of Ruzhin points out that this cow purifies the impure but renders the pure impure; God similarly purifies those who approach the sanctuary in a spirit of humility with knowledge of their own inadequacies, but condemns those who come in a spirit of arrogance and a claim to perfection.

Hizkuni - "Should you wonder how the red cow can make the unclean clean and the clean unclean, remember that fire can melt metal and harden eggs; drugs can heal the sick and sicken the healthy.