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“Our Story . . . Our Mission . . . Our Fight”

Many of you know that I had a “previous life” composing and editing music for TV shows and movies. For most of my twenties, I was working on what is now the Sony Studios lot in Culver City – which somehow led me to rabbinical study in Jerusalem... but that’s a sermon for a different day.

Those early years of my life in Los Angeles left a lasting impression on me in many ways – perhaps most memorably because the Rodney King riots took place then. I’ll never forget the experience of flying back home to Los Angeles in the midst of the riots and seeing everything burning below as we approached for landing.

The riots, as you may recall, were the largest our nation had seen since the 1960s. In fact, the death toll from the Rodney King riots was higher than in any American uprising since the New York City Draft Riots of 1863. And it was all unleashed because a black man was seen by the world on videotape being brutally beaten by white policemen following a high-speed chase, and the policemen were acquitted of any wrongdoing.

Twenty-three years have passed since the Rodney King riots, and most of America has looked with pride upon the considerable distance we have traveled as a nation since then. Rodney King healed from his injuries, and almost exactly one year after the riots, a second jury found that the officers had violated his civil rights, and they were jailed. Another year later, Rodney King was awarded \$3.8 million in damages from his civil suit, so in the end, some measure of justice had been achieved. And then we watched over the next decades as new barriers were broken by African-Americans in so many corners of communal life, culminating with the proud and profound moment of seeing an African-American man elected President of the United States. We had reason, we felt, to take notice of our progress as a nation on the matter of race.

And then, just fourteen months ago, while being arrested on suspicion of selling cigarettes illegally, an unarmed Eric Garner was placed in a chokehold by NYPD officers. He called out, “I can’t breathe” eleven times while his face was pressed into the sidewalk. He died from the encounter. And all of it was captured on video.

Then three weeks later, 22-year-old John Crawford was shot dead by Dayton, Ohio police while standing in a shopping aisle at a Wal-Mart, holding a toy gun in his hand. He was moving to run from the officers when he was shot. We know this because the whole episode was recorded on the store’s security video. Following the announcement that there would be no indictment, the special prosecutor described the case as “a tragedy for the family and for the police officers who were justified to take a life.”

Four days after Crawford was shot dead by police in Dayton, Michael Brown was shot dead by police in Ferguson. It is a case we all know well. And it is a controversial case, to be sure. Witnesses painted differing portraits of what had happened. But on one point, there was certainty. Michael Brown was unarmed when he was shot. No matter how scary he may have seemed to that policeman, he carried no weapon when he was shot dead – and we know how that fact was received on the streets of Ferguson.

Three months later, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was shot by a policeman in Cleveland while holding a BB gun in a park. The surveillance video shows the officer driving at high speed across the park lawn, and then stopping and shooting the boy immediately from less than ten feet away. The episode took only a few seconds.

Four months later, an unarmed Walter Scott was pulled over in South Carolina for a non-functioning brake light. Minutes later, he had been shot dead. The officer reported that he fired because he felt threatened when Scott took his taser. What the officer didn't know was that a bystander had recorded the incident on his phone. The witness had originally refrained from making his video public for fear of retribution, but having seen with his own eyes that Scott hadn't taken the taser... that he was shot while running to get away from the taser... he felt compelled to come forward. The officer has since been charged with murder.

Eight days after Walter Scott was shot, Freddie Gray was arrested in Baltimore. He got into the police van a healthy twenty-five-year-old. He exited the van in a coma, having suffered injuries to his spinal cord that caused his death a week later. The medical examiner's report led to Gray's death being ruled a homicide, for which the officers involved were charged.

And then just two months ago, Sam DuBose was pulled over in Cincinnati for a missing front license plate – and was shot dead. The policeman maintained that DuBose started to drive away, and with his arm stuck in the car, he was being dragged and had to fire. The bodycam on the officer told a different story... a very disturbing story... of a point-blank shot to the head of an unarmed man. The policeman has since been indicted for murder and voluntary manslaughter.

Eric Garner. John Crawford. Michael Brown. Tamir Rice. Walter Scott. Freddie Gray. Sam DuBose. And they're just the ones that made headlines. In just over one year... the Jewish year now ended. *Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha bish'gagah* – for the sin we have sinned unknowingly... uncarefully... uncaringly.

Now, I know that's hard to hear – for a whole lot of reasons. Let's talk about them. First, I want to be clear about something. Being a police officer is more than just a noble profession. It's a heroic one. The police live with a persistent level of danger that almost none of us would ever choose – and it's only because they do so that we can live safely and freely. And anyone who suggests that the racial tensions in America can be pinned squarely on our nation's police departments is engaging in willful scapegoating. We would surely love it if the problem were as simple as the reformation of the police force. But if we're being honest – and that's the demand of this season – we know that these shootings are only a symptom of an American illness that is hardly confined just to the police. And if you have a hard time with acknowledging that, ask yourself what you would have thought if all of these men killed this year – one by one by one – were Jews, not blacks.

Perhaps that might help us to penetrate another layer of resistance to seeing ourselves as part of this year's national shame – recognizing that there is a certain blindness that comes with the fact that it wasn't Jews who were killed. It was a different group of people, who live an experience that we are fated on some level to misunderstand, simply because we cannot live it. Except for a few among us, we cannot know what it is to walk out into America every day with brown skin. We cannot know the way others would look back at us. We cannot know the fears we would inspire... and the fears we would feel. We are kind-spirited people with noble intentions. We know that there is racism around us, and we try to be a part of eradicating it. What is harder for us to stomach is that we are often also a part of perpetuating it, in ways that we can scarcely even notice.

Believe me, I know how hardwired you are to resist that statement – because I am, too. But there are facts that get in the way of that resistance. I mean, there has to be a pretty grand explanation for how our country could have passed laws decades ago to end segregation, but segregation persists... for how our country could have passed laws decades ago to end discrimination, but discrimination persists... for how we passed laws decades ago to grant voting rights, and voting rights are denied. This happens not because of a few rogue policemen. It happens when the structure of society itself is built to replicate the old patterns, even while we think we're breaking them.

Don't believe me? Consider the numbers – and the way they collide with what kind-spirited people like us feel in our hearts.

We assert that the color of a person's skin has nothing to do with whether he will be a criminal. And yet black men in America are estimated to be seven times more likely to go to jail than white men.

We assert that the color of a person's skin has nothing to do with whether she will have a shot at the American dream. And yet black Americans are twice as likely to live in poverty as whites.

We celebrate the rise of a black man to the presidency of the United States. And polling demonstrates that racial prejudice in America has increased since President Obama's election, not decreased.

We speak proudly of ending racial segregation in the '60s. And right here in Los Angeles, segregation is on the rise. According to a recent UCLA study, in the 1970s, the average black student in Los Angeles went to a school that was 14% white. By the early 2000s, the average black student's school in L.A. was 6% white – and widespread research demonstrates that this trend continues to escalate both locally and nationally.

Does this mean that I am calling us all a bunch of bigots who say one thing but mean another? No. It means that there are stark realities attached to race in this country that don't even register consciously with us, simply because we were born on the right side of the American racial divide.

A kind-spirited white woman named Debby Irving spent her childhood in Winchester, Massachusetts – an upper-middle class community comprised mostly of other white people... kind of like where most of us live. When she was in her forties, she took a graduate level course in race and cultural identity, and it began a journey in her life that led last year to the publication of her landmark book, *Waking Up White*. Here is the way Debby Irving describes her journey:

“For years I struggled silently to understand race and racism,” she writes. “It turns out, stumbling block number one was that I didn’t think I had a race, so I never thought to look within myself for answers. The way I understood it, race was for other people, brown- and black-skinned people. Don’t get me wrong – if you put a census form in my hand, I would know to check ‘white’ or ‘Caucasian.’ It’s more that I thought all those other categories, like Asian, African American, American Indian, and Latino, were the real races. I thought white was the raceless race – just plain, normal...”

It’s the season of our deepest honesty. How many of us have thought of white as the raceless race... plain... normal? I certainly have. Have you?

“Thinking myself raceless,” says Debby Irving, “allowed for a distorted frame of reference built on faulty beliefs. For instance, I used to believe... I can help people of color by teaching them to be more like me... (I used to believe) racism is about bigots who make snarky comments and commit intentionally cruel acts against people of color.”

Does any of that sound familiar? It does to me. About this, Yale law professor Harlon Dalton once wrote: “Instead of... nasty people intent on using our color against us, we are surrounded by perfectly nice people who embrace the color-blind ideal with a vengeance.”

We are perfectly nice people. And we embrace the color-blind ideal more than we probably even realize. After all, there has to be some reason why those seven unarmed black men went to their deaths at the hands of white policemen, while Dylann Roof, who murdered nine black churchgoers in cold blood was captured alive, provided with some free Burger King by the officers who brought him in, and assigned a judge who expressed concern for his family. If you want to take a guess at what that does to black families in our country, imagine once again that it was seven unarmed Jews who were killed by police, and a neo-Nazi mass murderer of Jews who was provided with Burger King on his way to jail. Even if that’s standard operating procedure for an arrest like this – a way to get the suspect talking – imagine how it feels for an African-American to read that story in a year like this one?

It’s not our fault that we were born into a system that advantaged us. But it will surely be our fault if we neglect to use our advantage to make things more fair, either because we choose to remain sightless... or heaven forbid, because we *like* being advantaged in the system, and we want to retain that advantage for our kids and grandkids.

But if the problem is that we’re blind to much of the racism we sanction, how can we – people who are mostly Jews and mostly white – breathe in enough of the story of our African-American brothers and sisters to make a difference? We can do it because it’s not just their story. It’s also in some small, but meaningful part ours. And if ever there were white people in America who had a decent shot at understanding the call of this moment, we would be those white people.

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism – our shared engine for social justice as Reform Jews – sits in Washington, DC on Kivie Kaplan Way. Kivie Kaplan was the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, and he was

the one who purchased the building for the Religious Action Center. So we know he was a successful Jewish businessman and philanthropist. But what else do we know about Kivie Kaplan? We know that he was the President of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for nine years in the 1960s and '70s. How, you might ask, does a rich Jewish white man become President of the NAACP? He does it because as a young man on his honeymoon in Florida, he tries to enter a country club, but is met with a sign outside that reads, "No Jews, No Dogs." So he returns to his car, startled, pained... and of course, his driver is African-American. He tells Kivie that he knows how he feels – that *he's* not even permitted *outside* the club unless he has an escort. No Jews, no dogs, no blacks. And Kivie Kaplan joins the NAACP at the age of twenty-eight, climbing its ranks until he becomes president at the age of sixty-two. And along the way, he becomes the human intersection between the civil rights movement and America's Reform Jews. The two were one. That's why the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were written in the conference room of *our* Religious Action Center.

This is our story. Our mission. Our fight. Have we forgotten? Somewhere along the road of the great Jewish American success story – where we burst our way into the country clubs, and welcomed blacks as our caddies – did we become "just white?"

Ten days ago, we went to central North Carolina to say "no." A delegation of twelve Leo Baeckers, from ages ten to eighty-one, participated on America's Journey for Justice, a forty-day march from Selma, Alabama to Washington, DC, launched by the NAACP, and sponsored by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. A holy partnership, renewed. We joined our bodies and spirits together to ensure the right of every American, regardless of race, to a fair criminal justice system, uncorrupted and unfettered access to the ballot box, sustainable jobs with a living wage, and equitable public education. And accompanying us across America, every step of the march, has been a Torah scroll that you'll be able to visit at the Smithsonian, where it will be housed after the march ends. Every one of our LBT marchers carried that scroll for part of its journey – and passed it with love to our African-American fellow sojourners, who carried it with pride and inspiration.

And, of course, it was good that we had each other, because it was September 4th in North Carolina... which meant 91 degrees and 70% humidity. Even the Torah was sweating. And then came the afternoon thunderstorm – which my daughter Eliana found utterly fun and fascinating. It was admittedly less fun with the Torah strapped to my back in a giant pack covered with a rain slicker for four miles.

But that's not what I'll remember most about this day. What I'll remember most is the people we met and their stories. I'll remember Rosanell Eaton, the 94-year-old civil rights hero that President Obama wrote about in the New York Times Magazine this summer. Picture a 21-year-old black woman showing up to register to vote in 1942 segregated North Carolina. The white officials there demanded that she pass a "literacy test" by reciting the preamble to the Constitution... from memory. Fortunately, no one has ever asked me to do that. But Rosanell shocked them by delivering each word perfectly. She has registered thousands of others since then. But not coincidentally, almost immediately after the first black president was elected, the Voting Rights Act that was written in *our* conference room came under attack. And recently, Rosanell had to drive 252 miles just to register *herself* to vote – otherwise, her voter ID card would be invalidated. She is now the lead plaintiff against North Carolina's governor to combat what is arguably the most restrictive voting law in the nation. My children got to shake Rosanell's hand. I hope... I pray... that a little of her tenacity for justice might have rubbed off.

I'll remember Keshia Thomas – whose face may be familiar to you, because she appeared in one of the most iconic photographs of the past twenty years. It was at a 1996 Ku Klux Klan rally in Ann Arbor. Eighteen-year-old Keshia was in a group of counter-protestors nearby. Suddenly, a voice on a megaphone announced that there was a Klansman among them. And a middle-aged white man bearing an SS tattoo and wearing a Confederate flag t-shirt began to run – but he was knocked down, kicked and beaten with placards by the “peace-loving” anti-KKK demonstrators. The picture was taken after Keshia had already thrown her body on top of the man to shield him from violence, while screaming at his attackers to stop. We need not wonder whether this guy would have protected Keshia with *his* life if the tables had been turned... but nineteen years later, she's still devoting her life to justice, and I'm bringing her to meet all of you here at LBT later this year.

Amazing people. Amazing march. But it will add up to very little if we perfectly nice people of the raceless race don't hear the shofar's urgent call of this year – to abandon the color-blind ideal that locks our country into an endless loop of injustice.

Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha bish'gagah – for the sin we have sinned without even noticing... feeling certain it wasn't coming from us. We often convince ourselves that the task of these Holy Days is to confront those nagging sins we know we commit – the habits we know we should break, the shame we carry with us for who we know ourselves to be. I would argue that the much higher task of these days is to unearth the sins we haven't even entered into conversation with, because our self-perception won't permit it. Perhaps this is what the 20th century rabbinic giant, Joseph Soloveitchik, meant when he taught that “repentance cannot be comprehended rationally; it does not really make sense.” For when we are busy making sense, we are relying on our capacity for reason to talk ourselves into and out of all kinds of things. But while repentance does involve the rational, it also involves the visceral... that “soulful knowing” that I cannot talk myself out of. Our tradition calls it *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, the reckoning of our souls. And when it comes to racism, the time for our souls' reckoning has come.

Sadly, there is no law we can pass to change what our eye sees when an African-American is walking toward us on the street at night, nor can any law change what he sees when walking toward us. We can, however, push for every law that prevents whatever assumptions or fears we may carry around with us from turning into legalized injustice. And we have the chance to push for one such law right now. Five days ago, the California State Senate passed AB 953, a bill that would require police officers for the next five years to report basic information from all law enforcement stops, including the officers' perception of the race of the person they've stopped. The data will then be analyzed by a new advisory board that will include social scientists, law enforcement representatives, human and civil rights groups, clergy, and government – and together, they will be able to make policy recommendations to address any findings of racial profiling.

Seems logical enough, right? The bill accuses nobody of anything. It just says, “Let's find out the facts about racial profiling in our state, so our actions will be based on data, not conjecture.” Pretty hard to argue with that – which is why 67% of Californians support the measure. But it's now up to Governor Brown to decide if he'll sign it, and our Reform CA coalition's meetings with the governor's staff suggest that getting his signature is a 50-50 proposition at best.

So you know what comes next... and so does the governor. Two years ago, our congregation, along with our Reform CA partners, crashed the governor's phone lines with more than a thousand calls urging him to sign the TRUST Act, which he had vetoed the year before. With your help, we got it signed. And let me tell you one thing we've learned from the governor's staff... he knows who crashed his phones last time, and he'll know who you are when you call this time. Tonight, before the breadcrumbs from our Tashlich service wash away into the ocean, you will receive an email message with simple instructions for contacting the governor. We have a real chance here to change the outcome. Please... for the sake of justice... for the sake of making this day about more than words... let's blitz those phones one more time.

An ancient *midrash* tells us that the shofar's cry, which we are about to hear, is supposed to remind us of the crying of Sarah, the first Jewish mom, who wept when she heard about Abraham taking leave of his senses and binding their son Isaac for sacrifice. Of course, she wept only because she *feared* her son would die. The loved ones of Eric Garner, John Crawford, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray and Sam DuBose were not so fortunate. Nor were the loved ones of the nine souls killed while studying Bible together in Charleston. But let this awful year of bloodshed not confuse us. Every mom of every black child is Sarah... crying the shofar's cry, fearful that her child will die.

This is our story. Our mission. Our fight. We have not become "just white." Let the shofar cry. And let our souls hear as they have never heard before.