



LeoBaeckTemple

Rev. Zachary Hoover

“Enough Room for All of Us”

MLK Shabbat 2020 January 17, 2020

I recognize that I stand on land that belonged to the Tongva people until they were violently removed from it. Their blood still cries to us from the ground, even as their ancestors live amongst us as one of the largest native urban populations in the country.

I recognize that I stand before you as a Christian minister, and that the Christian church has a history of sanctioning anti-semitic violence going back centuries.

I recognize that I stand before you as a white, straight man who has benefited from all three of those identities being built on the harm and oppression of differently-identified people.

*And* I see a future where we are all one people, not by erasing our identities, but by encompassing a new one together. A world wherein fit many worlds.

I love being at Leo Baeck Temple as a friend in the struggle to heal the world. Thank you always for your warm welcome, and thank you Rabbis Chasen, Berney, and Ross, Cantor Kates, President Lloyd Segan, the co-chairs of your Community Organizing Leadership Team - Bea Richman, Eric Stockel, Robyn Samuels and the rest of justice team for your friendship.

I have immense gratitude for the opportunity you have given me to share with you on this anniversary of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday, now 52 years since his murder. I have to tell you it was a struggle, this sermon. There is so much to reckon with before I even say a word. Whiteness. Christian dominant culture. Jewish identity in a moment of rising anti-semitism fueled by and fueling white nationalist dreams and anti-black racism. Votes on jail reform, money for schools and communities, District Attorneys, supervisors, presidents. A census count designed to exclude. Deaths of Black people by police or the benign neglect of society. And today, apparently a Brazilian government official paraphrasing Nazi propaganda. There’s a lot to reckon with. A lot of intersections of power, oppression and privilege.

Although weeks of the year, I am laser focused on winning antiracist policies, like passing Schools and Communities First to ending a forty year structurally racist policy that has starved our schools and public budgets; or defending what we won for and with formerly incarcerated people via Proposition 47, which is under attack this November; or getting rent protections for families being evicted or facing rent hikes of 100% as the only real way to deal with the crisis of homelessness; or stopping our sheriff from being ICE’s #1 provider of deportees; or pressuring DA Lacey who continues to seek the death penalty despite a Gubernatorial moratorium. That’s what I do all week. And so, if you want to talk about that, I can talk to you about it as can your COLT team. But tonight, I want to focus on remembering, hearing, and what’s at stake for each of us in the choices to remember or not. To hear or not.

The scripture reading, or Torah portion, for this week is the beginning chapters of the book of Exodus. Chapter 1 vs. 8 reads, “Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph...” In the preceding verses, we learned that Joseph is already dead, so we aren’t talking about literally knowing someone in life here. We are talking about a relationship through time, a story that might live into the present about Joseph and his people being inside the circle of community rather than outside. We might say the pharaoh didn’t remember Joseph. If you told this Pharaoh the story of Joseph, he wouldn’t even know how to hear it. Joseph doesn’t belong to him, and neither do Joseph’s people. And this is the theme for my sermon, remembering and hearing.

“Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph.”

My first racial memory is fuzzy, but it’s there. I’m in a classroom, grade school—not sure whether first or second grade—at Brentwood Elementary School in Plainfield, Indiana. We are working on some kind of art project that involves, or I’ve decided will involve, a representation of myself. I must have asked someone about color and me, because I remember trying to use the white color crayon to color myself. After a little bit of coloring, I stopped, looked, and thought, “well that doesn’t look like me—I can barely see me on the white paper!” I can only assume I picked back up a peach-ish colored crayon and continued. Society was already making me white, and I attempted to color myself other than I am in reality because of it.

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In high school, Mr. Freezell Brown, my first Black teacher, encouraged me to volunteer in a library in the neighborhood where he’d grown up. So I went to Clifton St. twice a week and tutored a second grader named Marcus. One day, we sent Marcus home for fighting—fighting kids a lot bigger than him. Turns out he had spent the night alone in a dark house with no dinner because his mom was out trying to hustle some money to get the electricity back on. Then he went to school and came to tutoring. I got in my car that night, drove twenty minutes on the interstate to Plainfield to a warm house with a family at a dinner table and to the place where I’d sleep while my golden pathway to prosperity opened before me with efforts that no rational person would call extraordinary. Life for Zach. Death for Marcus. That night was the first night I knew I had been lied to about who had what, how much of it, and why. It was the first night I really felt, in my bones, that my whiteness was intimately tied to Marcus’ Blackness, and that my whiteness was tied to my golden pathway to life and to his already obstacle strewn struggle against death. I also realized, and I say it more clearly these 25 years later, that this reality made me smaller somehow. And though I wanted Marcus and Mr. Brown to be free from it, I wanted out too. It trapped me and hurt. And it offered me a choice. I remember telling God as I prayed, “God, I’ll either remember Marcus when I am old or I won’t. Use me God.”

“Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph.”

Do you think the new King chose to forget Joseph’s story? Did he forget Joseph because no one wrote it down? Because the Egyptians were really bad at record keeping? Because the story was in the papyrus library in a book his dad or mom never read to him because it was less important than other things for pharaohs-in-training?

Or did he forget Joseph because he needed to in order to carry out the enslavement and in order to continue to benefit economically from the labor of others even as their children suffered.

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In the podcast “White Lies”, two white Alabamians narrate their experiences trying to uncover the truth about who killed Rev. James Reeb, a white Unitarian Universalist minister who responded to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s call to ministers and clergy to come to the Selma after the brutal beating of 100s of innocent and unarmed men, women, and children as they attempted to cross the Edmund Pettis bridge on a march for voting rights. The beating was shown on ABC in a special report that interrupted the network’s broadcast of “Judgment at Nuremberg.” One of the marchers, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a 26 year old Black man was shot in the side by a sheriff that day and killed, but it was Minister Reeb’s white death a week later that further galvanized white people to clamor for civil rights and got President Johnson’s attention.

The most striking moments in the podcast are the interviews with the white people from Selma who were directly involved in the events of 1965 and what people chose to remember, including ensuing lies that White Selmans told themselves and that shaped their collective, public memory—namely, that “the movement needed a white martyr, so civil rights workers killed that minister on the way to the hospital in Birmingham.” They didn’t want to know Rev. Reeb’s death. Didn’t want to remember him.

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Three of the attackers were tried and acquitted within 30 minutes. The fourth attacker, Bob Portwood who was never tried, when asked about his memory of the night when he beat Rev. Reeb to death, says, “You just learn not to hear it.” As the journalist in the podcast are probing and trying to get this older man, who has dementia by the way, to share about that night—the truth of itlisten to some of his responses:

B PORTWOOD: “I tried to forget it 'cause I knew damn well a long time ago they were going to kill me. But I can't do a whole lot. I really can't. It's honest. You ever had an honest truth from something there? And that's what - I don't even want to talk about it 'cause... I was a part of it. I was part of it.

...

I PORTWOOD: He was in with them, and he saw it.

B PORTWOOD: Yeah. You know, I can't remember that. I don't - hell, when you get bad stuff, you leave it alone - learn not to hear it. I had to get rid of it in my mind, and it's gone.

I PORTWOOD: But you worked in that group. And you were the muscle, I think, behind them. You were the bouncer.

...

B PORTWOOD: I was real, real bad. But I didn't kill. It was mostly just stomping the hell out of somebody that ... - that they didn't like. I was a bad, bad boy. And - but I never have been able to get, you know, caught. I didn't get no...

I PORTWOOD: No. No, you never were - had any trouble with the law. Never.

B PORTWOOD: When I wanted to lose it, I lost it. People say, well, you hear it. I don't hear it. I couldn't hear it if you sit there and tell me of it 'cause it was tough.

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This man tried to forget murdering another person and did it so effectively that he literally lost his memories from the rest of his life, ones he perhaps wished to keep.

When we “learn not to hear it” or will ourselves to forget, we have to imprison a part of ourselves, and we don't get to control the secondary impacts! How many of us have “learned not to hear it” because to do so is painful or would be inconvenient or because we heard a different explanation that absolves us of responsibility. How many of us have learned not to hear the cries of Black people as they are systematically oppressed in this country—shot, jailed, excluded, evicted, unsupported, questioned, doubted, and generally seen as undeserving of the same life that others have, that maybe you have. Maybe you have a sense of what it would cost you to really hear the groans of God's people. But what is it costing you to not hear it and act accordingly?

When God confronts Cain about Abel in Genesis, he says, “Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.” The ground we stand on, the layers within us, are layered with joys, yes, with life, yes. They also have layers of blood that continue to cry out to God and will do so until we choose to hear it, to remember, to really *remember* all that has happened, to honor it, to apologize, and to ask God to cover over those sins so we can repent—so we can turn—in a new direction.

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There is one king who chooses to forget for the sake of power, to oppress. Pharaoh doesn't care about the cries of the Hebrew slaves, and he chooses not to hear it. He learns not to hear it. Even if you told him about it, he wouldn't be able to hear you. Where have you allowed pharaoh to arise in you and become deaf to people's cries? If a policy is too complicated and not clean enough when it comes to righting a wrong, do you hear it? Can you see it's racial implications?

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But there is another king in our scriptures. Adonai. And this king is the true king. A king who remembers and chooses to hear. As in Psalm 116 “ God has inclined their ear to me, therefore I will call on God as long as I live.” The story of our scriptures is of a God of remembrance and a God of hearing. God remembers God's covenants. With creation after the flood—even places a monument, you might say, in the sky to remind Godself. God remembers the covenant with Israel. God inclines his ear to hear the groaning of his people enslaved.

And when it comes to our shortcomings, I'm pretty sure God remembers. Despite all our Baptist hymns about sins being washed white like snow, in Christian scripture 1 Peter 4:8 it says that "Love covers over a multitude of sins."

Psalm 32:1-5 says, replacing "I" with the plural: "The one whose wrong doing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy! The one on the Lord doesn't consider guilty, in whose spirit there is no dishonesty, that one is truly happy! When we kept quiet, our bones wore out; we were groaning all day long, every day, every night, because your hand was heavy upon us. Our energy was sapped as if in a summer drought. So we admitted our sin to you. We didn't conceal our guilt. We'll confess our sins to the Lord, is what we said. Then you removed the guilt of our sin." Only in remembrance can we be freed to strike out toward beloved community.

Will a new people come to power who remember?

Too many people's blood cries out to you and me from the ground and from their living mouths for each of us to hear them alone, for that we have been given community. We have been given to each other in belonging, and we have been made b'tselem Elohim, God's very likeness and image. And if we are made as God's very image, then we are made to remember, to learn to hear it—to incline our ear to the groans of our human family. We must reject the pharaoh that lives in all of us that wishes to come to power and not remember Joseph, the sibling who has been our family all along. When we live out of our true selves, we do as God does. We choose to remember. We choose to hear. And if you weren't around, that doesn't exempt you. Raise your hand if you benefit today from slavery. Every hand should be up, because the initial wealth of this nation was only possible because of the enslavement of people with darker bodies. What a world. You can flee destruction elsewhere and still be here benefiting from the destruction of other people. All the moments before us live in us at this very moment. Time is a layered caking of sediment of sufferings and joys, not an arrow we ride in one direction.

Will a true people come to power who remember? It will take all of us and more.

Andres, my son, has to remember. I will make sure he remembers the Shoah. I will make sure he remembers chattel slavery. I will make sure he remembers the massacre of native peoples. It won't be fun to start talking to him a lot more explicitly about race this year, but he's almost five, so it's time, because it's already happening to him whether I like it or not. I hope he never thinks he's supposed to pick up the white crayon but always colors in truth.

Will your true self come to power and remember? Will America come to power and remember? Will America learn to hear it?

When America learns to remember and learns to hear it, we will find our true power. We cannot create belonging out of erasure when the blood still cries to us from the ground. We can only create belonging by allowing it all to belong and then singing a new song together that laments our ugliness and rejoices in our beauty and inspires us to nurture a new story as one people.

Whether I am talking about our collective memory of anti-semitism and hearing how it is happening today as an old tune played by new instruments, or about native peoples dead and living, or about people from Central America dying in cages, or moms 4 housing, the black homeless moms occupying corporate owned empty buildings in Oakland, or the forty year legacy of slowly destroying our public schools while letting corporations accumulate wealth, or the ongoing, seemingly intractable disproportionate death that this society, and you and I as part of it, continue to allow and perpetuate against those human beings whose bodies are darker, I would rather sing these ugly truths than a beautiful lie. In singing these ugly truths, we will be liberated to sing a new song, to sing a new people, to sing a new America where all belong and thrive, Jew and Muslim, Black and White, Asian or African diaspora, native or native born, he she or they, a world wherein fit many worlds.

Will your true self come to power and remember? Will a new people come to power that remembers? Will a new nation arise that remembers? That wants to learn to hear it? Arise! There are too many pharaohs, creation needs you to arise! Your family needs you to arise! Say with me, "I will remember! I do remember! I will hear it! I will hear it!" May we do and may we understand. Na'aseh v'nishma.