



LeoBaeckTemple

Associate Rabbi Benjamin Ross

“Zochreinu l’chayim, Remember Us So We May Live!”

Rosh Hashanah 5781 September 19, 2020

(In memory of George Perry Floyd, Jr. z”l)

The day after labor day caught us off guard. We set up the kids for their Monday learning at home, but we were late by half an hour as it was Tuesday, not Monday.

Zeke was delighted, Reuven was beside himself. We realized we had not printed the necessary pages for one kid, precipitating an unsuccessful mad dash to locate them. Kids melting down, parents flailing and shaken, feeling like failures. We were one minute into the start of the week and we were all falling apart.

Even as we are grateful for all the blessings in our own lives, we are also struggling. There is a deluge of micro and macro stories of suffering in this moment. Most far worse than the drama of our home. Unfathomable number of bereaved families.

Millions of jobs lost, families living in desperate states struggling to pay rent or mortgages and put food on the table. Kids without necessary technology to learn at home. So-called essential workers not even paid a living wage, risking their lives for those of us safe at home. Our Black and Brown brothers and sisters are contracting and dying from Covid at a rate 2-to-3 times the rate of White Americans.

All the inequality and brokenness from before the pandemic has been magnified.

Sadly, instead of a nation united, sharing the burden of this hostile virus, we have been further torn asunder. Our federal government has abandoned us, leaving us to fend for ourselves. We are in a vortex of disconnection: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. And many of us do not have access to the healing power of human touch we so desperately crave and deserve.

There are moments, when I’m being hugged by one of my kids or I jump on an LBT zoom event and I see your faces and we are just together and I’m caught with my guard down. My soul softens and I just want to weep.

What is happening to us?

I believe we are experiencing disenfranchised grief. This is a type of grief, a deep sorrow, that is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned. It is not so much that we are physically isolated, but that our reality and suffering is unacknowledged.

And then, there are events that rightfully make our individual suffering seem small in juxtaposition.

The murder of George Floyd, may his memory be for a blessing, cracked something open. The hatred and harm endured by Black men and women, the horror absorbed by Black bodies, became a truer truth.

It took eight minutes and forty-six seconds to kill George Floyd, but centuries of affirming the diminished worth of black bodies to arrive at that horrific episode. With a knee on his neck and another knee on his back and a third officer holding down his legs, blood coming out of his nose, Floyd repeatedly calls out, "I can't breathe."

He begs, "Please, man!"

A bystander yells at the police, "Let him breathe, man!"

Floyd, 46-years-old, calls out, repeatedly, "Momma! Momma! I'm through."

Lonnae O'Neal, reflecting in National Geographic, writes, "A call to your mother is a prayer to be seen. Floyd's mother died two years ago, but he used her as a sacred invocation."

During the days of awe, we insert a sacred invocation into the standard Amidah liturgy, our standing prayer sequence crafted to replace the offering of sacrifices on the temple mount in Jerusalem. We chant:

"Zochreinu l'chayim, Remember us for life,

melech chafeitz bachayim, sovereign God who treasures life.

v'chotveinu b'sefer hachayim, Inscribe us in the Book of Life,

l'maancha, Elohim chayim. for Your sake, God of life."

Zochreinu l'chayim - What does that mean "remember us for life"?

Just as we speak the name of a beloved before Kaddish, at protests across America, and around the globe, they shout,

"George Floyd, say his name."

"Breonna Taylor, say her name."

"Ahmaud Arbery, say his name."

To say their names is to affirm their value, to say they mattered.

To remember them is to be alive with the pain and truth of loss, of their lives and the horrific pile of black corpses who came before, hung from trees in the South, who die in under-resourced hospitals in the north.

As James Baldwin wrote in 1963,

“You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being...”

As a white man, and a Jew, who grew up in an affluent home, I have spent a chunk of my life, and more deeply in the last number of years and months, seeking to mentally grasp hate directed at Black people.

I know many of you are also on this journey with me.

Consciously and unconsciously, we are exploring our own prejudices, discomfort, and internalized hatred toward Black bodies. Exploring the ways in which we have benefited simply because most of us were born White and not Black.

Isabel Wilkerson, in her book *Caste: The Origins of our Discontent*, helps me to understand. She generally stays away from using the words “racism,” “Black” or “White” instead using terms like “dominant caste” verse “subordinate caste.” In short, in her own words, race and caste “can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other. Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin.”

Wilkerson defines **caste** as, “an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning.”

She effortlessly weaves in her lived experiences as a Black woman. The story of a jeweler in Chicago brushing past her because she could not possibly be the New York Times reporter he was scheduled to speak with, even after she handed him her card. The plumber who arrived at her Washington D.C. townhouse and asked if the lady of the house was home. The physical assault she endured from a White man as she was disembarking a plane and the enfeebled silence of bystanders. These are private snapshots of the thousands of public indignities, or far worse, endured by those of the subordinate caste.

Wilkerson’s premise is that to understand America, is to comprehend the architecture of a caste system. On the top is the dominant caste, originally White Protestants, on the bottom, Black people, the untouchables, the unworthy, only redeemed through slavery, labeled sub-human by early American Christian theologians.

Did you know that in bibles printed in 1807, and distributed by missionaries to slaves, that the story of the Exodus from Egypt was intentionally stripped out, lest it present a model of liberation and redemption?

The American history I was taught as a child was like a slice of pale Swiss cheese, full of holes. It made invisible the violent caste structure that enslaved, violated and brutalized Africans, while elevating whiteness.

Holes in our history, including: The the perpetuation of slavery's horror through sharecropping after the civil war; excluding Blacks from 95% of all jobs outside of agriculture and service work; passing vagrancy laws imprisoning tens of thousand forced into unpaid labor; the horrors of our modern prison system: and untold daily violations and humiliations.

Holes in our knowledge and therefore, remembrance of who we are.

Zochreinu l'chayyim. Remember us so we may live.

In the 1660s, shortly after the first enslaved Africans arrived on our shores in 1619, Virginia lawmakers crafted legislation to place Blacks in a lower caste from White indentured servants - and early American laws were developed to keep them there.

As Wilkerson writes, these laws, "converted the black womb into a profit center and drew sharper lines around the subordinate caste, as neither mother nor child could make a claim against an upper-caste man, and no child springing from a black womb could escape condemnation to the lowest rung."

Eventually, forty-one of the fifty states passed laws making intermarriage a crime with up to ten years in prison. Alabama was the last state to repeal their intermarriage laws... in the year 2000, a mere 20 years ago... and with 40% of the electorate still voting to maintain the ban.

1619 to 2020: That is 401 years of our country, in various forms, legally and illegally, and violently and passively, enforcing bright lines between dominant and subordinate castes.

In 1920, a wealthy Black landowner July Perry tried to vote in Florida. White rioters, so infuriated at the crossing of the caste lines, impinging on their caste's exclusive right of voting, triggered the lynching, castration, and killing of sixty black people.

Was George Floyd and the countless murders before and after him the 2020 version of this 1920 massacre? The dominant class exerting its power over the subordinate class?

The Caste system is not abstract, it is not distant from us. It is us. We are breathing it in, and maintaining it, with every breath, with every affirmation of its boundaries, caste pervades and perverts the American soul.

When we declare our innocence, our separation, when we fool ourselves into believing we are not consciously or unconsciously participants in reifying the horrors of caste, we affirm its existence, we affirm Black lives have less value than White lives.

Zochreinu l'chayyim: How do we remember to live?

When the Nazi's sought to implement a rigid caste system, the chair of their study group in 1934 included a detailed summary of how the U.S. segregated and dehumanized Blacks.

Wilkerson reports Adolph Hitler himself remarked with admiration, the United States' "knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death."

But at least in Germany there was reckoning and reparations. Germans have *Stolperstein*, or "stumbling stones," all over Berlin to inconveniently remind folks of the horrors of the Holocaust with the names of victims and atrocities engraved in stone. There are now more than 30,000 of these stumbling stones in dozens of German cities.

In contrast, we have over 1,500 Confederate monuments, affirming the righteousness of the struggle to maintain slavery, and the dominant caste. In unique American fashion, during the years after the civil war the enslavers were celebrated and the victims were punished.

There are a lot of "false narratives" about what was - a striving to be that way, again. Academics label folks voting to maintain caste dominance as "nostalgia voters" as they have a wistful affection for the past, when the lines between black and white were more clear.

Possibly, the collective response to the murder of George Floyd is reflective of a crack in the caste hardened hearts of many white Americans. Maybe we are ready to remember?

You do not have to be a social scientist to imagine that Blacks may feel a sense of generational disenfranchised grief - surviving in a country that does not openly acknowledge, socially validate, or publicly mourn the violence perpetrated by the Caste system we created.

Zochreinu l'chayyim

Rabbi Larry Hoffman teaches that one use of *zekher*, *to remember*, comes from the Talmud. The Talmud uses the term by saying,

"There may be no proof for such and such a proposition, but there is a *zekher* for it.' *Zecher* can hardly mean 'remembrance' here...It is better translated as a pointer that fastens our attention across time, space, and even logic...It rivets our consciousness on our inherent connectivity to something that might otherwise be lost ...We move on with our lives when the moment of remembrance ends, but the connecting tissue to the event being memorialized attends us wherever we go, deepening our sense of what matters and committing ourselves to the lessons that flow from it."

Of course, that is as true for all of us internally, as it is for us collectively as a nation.

Because this year has been so hard, part of me wanted to deliver an epic spiritual hug today, not an epic spiritual agitation. I'm hoping you receive it as both.

If we want our country to live and to thrive, if we want a country for all our children, we must use our Zecher, remembrance, as a pointer to what has been, to help us truly look at our history and its implications.

We must use our remembrance to repair what is broken and dismantle the structures that uphold our caste system. If not, George Floyd, and other George Floyds will be killed again and again.

As Martin Luther King Jr., challenged White clergy in his letter from Birmingham Jail, "All too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows." Our High Holydays must not leave us silent behind stained glass.

You say, "I alone cannot change it." True, we cannot change all of it at once. But we must find our piece of the puzzle, and dig in on one thing that you believe will force us to remember and live.

We need to help each other act. I know I need your help. If we are not fighting, in some small and fierce way, in our corner of the world, we are saying what is happening is ok by us.

In a land...

Where we express heartbreak about the plight of the unhoused... and then fight multi-unit zoning in our neighborhoods...

Where black children have a 500% higher death rate from asthma compared with white children...

Where tax breaks for the wealthiest corporations and prisons for the poorest are prioritized over quality schools for children...

Where the net worth of a typical white family is nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family.

Let us look courageously through unstained glass at these devastating truths on these Holydays,
and say with our words, our deeds, and our lives:

Zochreinu l'chayim, remember all the members of this nation,

Zochreinu l'chayim, remember all that is and has been,

Zochreinu l'chayim, remember us all, so we all may live!

L'shana tova!