

How We Wronged Our Brother
A Sermon for Parshat Naso 2020
in Memory of George Floyd
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Shabbat Shalom

My friends, it is the holy Sabbath, a time of peace, a time of spirit. But we can have no peace and our spirits cannot rest easy with all that has been happening this week in our nation; as protests are held in cities across our nation; as police sometimes walk with and bend the knee in solidarity with protesters or act with restraint while at other times respond with tear gas and other violence.

We can have no peace and our spirits cannot rest easy because a black man named George Floyd was mercilessly killed by a police officer who pressed his knee onto Floyd's neck for almost 9 minutes, holding it there even after Floyd said he could not breathe, even after he passed out. What was worse, three other police officers stood by, allowing their brother police office to murder this man who posed no danger to them, to murder him because he was black and they thought that made it all right. But it wasn't all right. It was far from all right. We know that. It was a terrible, heart searing injustice, not just perpetrated on Floyd. It has been perpetrated for years now and has struck fear, and righteous indignation, in the hearts of our black neighbors and friends, black youth, black men, and their mothers, wives and sisters.

For years no one, not our leaders, not us, no one, has done anything to stop this injustice.

This is the truth and we have to acknowledge the truth if we want to make any reasonable strides towards changing it.

This is the lesson from our Torah reading today, Parshat Naso. Specifically from the Book of Numbers, Chapter 5, verses 6 and 7: *When a man or a woman commits any wrong toward a person, thus breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes one's guilt, he shall confess and make restitution.*

What wrongs have *we* committed toward our fellow human beings? A hint is found in the Hebrew original: "When a man or woman commits *any* wrong toward *haadam...*" which translates as "*the* human being." In other words, each person is the equivalent of the first person, the first human being, Adam. As our Sages teach, God created all humanity from one *Adam*, from the one original Adam, to teach that no one's blood is redder than another's. We are all equally children of God, created in the Divine image and worthy of equality and respect. We are all brothers and sisters, descended from the same original ancestor.

So, what wrongs have *we* committed? We turned a blind eye to injustice by standing by the blood of our brothers, not just George Floyd but Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and so many more. Years of deaths and what did we do?

Some of us attended rallies with our African American partners, but not most of us. Some of us worked on and participated in our various interfaith programs like Courageous Conversations and the Teen Interfaith Initiative to build bridges of understanding and to combat racism, anti-Semitism and all kinds of hate. But not most of us.

And even those of us who rallied and participated in dialogues, all too easily and quietly turned back to our own lives and concerns as soon as those rallies and programs were over.

I was glad to learn that a number of our congregants joined the car caravan and rally this week in downtown Columbia. COVID made participation difficult for many of us. I have been working with our interfaith partners are public statements as well. But the real test is how well we will remain engaged as the headlines fade. One week or several of protests does not make societal change. It takes concerted, coordinated, and sustained effort, across a mosaic of alliances, as it did in the Civil Rights Movement, the fight against the Vietnam War, and the women's movement.

I was glad to see the protests across the nation drew people of all colors and genders, black, white, and brown. I am reminded how our Emeritus, Rabbi Noah Golinkin of blessed memory, stood with Rev. Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial. That is the kind of commitment we are called upon to make, the kind of restitution our verses command of us: sustained action that can make a difference.

Our verse in the Book of Numbers states that when we wrong another person, any person, we have broken faith with the Lord. Think about what this means for a moment: to wrong another human being is to *wrong God!* Why? Because our covenant demands we stand up for the stranger in our midst and love one's neighbor as oneself.

Our verse also commands that we make restitution. How can we make restitution in this complex state of affairs?

The first step is being honest with ourselves and our neighbors: Racism is a fact of life in America. As a Jewish community, a minority in the midst of rising anti-Semitism, we generally don't think of ourselves as white, as enjoying white privilege. But we do. Certain opportunities open easier for us than for our black neighbors. We don't have to fear that our young men will be randomly picked up for walking down a street, looking suspicious in a neighborhood, or entering their own homes. Naming that privilege, acknowledging it, is the first step toward being honest with ourselves and respectful of the different experience of our black neighbors.

The second step is acknowledging that systemic racism is woven into almost every aspect of society, from how black students are treated differently than white students with the same academic aptitude, or behavior problems, to how resources are distributed on every level of society (including here in Howard County), to how our justice system functions and dysfunctions).

The third step is consistently, cooperatively, and non-violently, working with others of good will to move our society towards justice. Everyone here can do something: whether march, or write, or give, or organize, or vote.

We no longer bring animal sacrifices as expiation. Instead, as our sages taught, we gain atonement, we make restitution, through prayer, repentance, and acts of *gemilut hasadim*, acts of loving kindness. Our communities and our nation need all the acts of prayer, repentance, and lovingkindness we can summon right now.

Our two verses from the Book of Numbers, transmitted to our People thousands of years ago, hold major import for us today. We wrong God when we wrong our fellow human beings. And when we do that, we can have no peace and our spirits cannot rest easy until we make restitution for the wrong we have done. Only then can we have peace.

I don't think it is an accident that after all the hard work of repentance and restitution is undertaken in Chapters five and six of our Torah reading, the very next chapter, in chapter 6:24-26, recounts how God instructs the priests to bless the people and culminates with the blessing that God grant us peace.

I think God, the Torah, and all of Jewish tradition are trying to teach us something very powerful: that each of us can make a difference in helping move the curve of history towards the kind of justice in which we all can enjoy peace. That is our God given mission as Jews, as a light unto the nations, as the appointed repository responsible for spreading the foundational value of human equality and personal responsibility in the world for thousands of years.

May each of us rise to fulfill this task God has set for us by doing our part to help build a more just society in which true peace can reign. And let us say, Amen