

Who Gets to Tell the Story?ⁱ
 A Sermon for First Day Rosh Hashanah, 2020
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Shanah Tovah

I got to see *Hamilton* this summer, on Disney +, and finally understood why our Bnai Mitzvah students have been singing its lyrics around my kitchen table these past few years of Shabbatons.

It is a powerful show about identity, ideals, ambition, and loss. It offers a vision of what America can be, what we can be.

Nothing exemplifies this better than the show's casting of Black and Brown actors for our founding fathers. I must admit it took me a few moments to bridge the cultural dissidence of seeing Black men play our white founding fathers. But that is part of what makes *Hamilton* so powerful, forcing us to reconsider who is included and who, usually, is not.

The show is not just about race. At one point, Hamilton (born and raised in the Danish West Indies) and the Marquis de Lafayette (from France) high five each other to the line, "Immigrants — we get the job done." Women, though written out of so much history, are also spotlighted. The play ends with Hamilton's wife Eliza singing,

"Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?...
 ...when you're gone, who remembers your name?
 ...I put myself back in the narrative..."

Though few of us remember Eliza Hamilton, she did write herself into the narrative, editing and publishing Hamilton's letters, speaking out against slavery, and much more.

In reflecting the diversity of America, *Hamilton* achieves what our founding fathers could not, what we still have not: a place where all people are judged not by their race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, or faith, but by their talent and the content of their character, to paraphrase Rev. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Rev. King gave that speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Aug. 28, 1963. Our Emeritus, of blessed memory, Rabbi Noach Golinkin was on the

dias with him that day. Rabbi Golinkin, a refugee from Hitler's Europe, understood the importance of standing together against all forms of hate and injustice.

Standing together is just as important today, almost 60 years after that speech, almost 250 years after the Declaration of Independence. The vision of diversity and equity reflected in *Hamilton* is still not the reality in our classrooms, our courts, our voting booths, our halls of power, nor on our streets.

Who lives, who dies, who gets to tell the story, indeed?

Several years ago, the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies (ICJS) tapped us, at Beth Shalom, to pilot a new interfaith curriculum on brothers in the Bible that included the story of Isaac and Ishmael we read today in our Torah portion. We partnered with our dear friends at Locust United Methodist Church next door, an historic Black church founded in 1865 by formerly enslaved individuals. The result astounded and discomfited everyone in the class.

When we Jews read this story, we feel bad for Hagar, torn from her homeland in Egypt, who, as a slave, had no power or choice over what happened to her. Yet, we also view her and Ishmael as the perpetrators in the story. Sarah raises Hagar up from slave to concubine, which, in Ancient Near Eastern law, was a type of contract granting the legal wife custody of any resulting children. Hagar not only refuses to honor this agreement but uses her pregnancy to torment and try to usurp barren Sarah. Ishmael is also not innocent in our eyes. The Hebrew text says Ishmael *metahek*, played, with Isaac, a term implying sexual contact, in other words, some kind of abuse. We, thus, see Sarah as justified in demanding Ishmael and Hagar be sent away, a demand God confirms and orders Abraham to obey.

The ICJS pilot curriculum did not expect too different a reading from the Christians in the room.

Our Black participants read our shared Biblical text very differently. Their comments were filled with pain and indignation. To them, Hagar was the victim, Abraham the perpetrator and Sarah the enabler, a pattern of rape experienced by countless enslaved Black women by white masters as their wives looked the other way. That God continues to watch over Hagar and Ishmael offered a message of solace and hope amidst despair.

We Jews in the room were beyond uncomfortable. It was very hard to hear our People's founding father and mother compared to rapist plantation owners. We defended Sarah and Abraham, citing the Hammarabi Code, noting that Ishmael must have done something so dangerous even God agrees Hagar and Ishmael must

go, ordering Abraham to obey Sarah. Such arguments did not touch the heart of our Black neighbors nor their pain.

Our holy Torah commands us in Leviticus (chapter 18, verse 19): *vahavta lereicha k'mocha*, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The Hasidic Master Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov taught, no one can really love one’s neighbors unless you know what hurts them.ⁱⁱ

We began to listen and ask questions. As our neighbors found us empathetic and honestly interested in what they had to say, they became more open to what we shared, about our own struggles through history as a minority in Christian and Arab lands and, personally, at the hands of neighbors and classmates who have abused us, and may still abuse us, for being Jews.

It was a very powerful class that drew us closer together. For their part, ICJS apologized they had not even considered these Biblical stories from a Black perspective.

Who lives, who dies and who tells the story, indeed.

We are living through a struggle right now for the soul and vision of America, a struggle of ideas and ideals not so different than the 1960’s nor 1770s, though hopefully a lot less violent. Black Lives Matter is the new Civil Rights Movement and we Jews have a responsibility to be part of it. Not just because the same white supremacists that target Blacks, target Jews, though they do.

We have a responsibility because it is part of the holy task God gave us in the world. God gave us the concept, the ideal, that all people are created equal. Our nation’s white founding fathers learned that ideal from our Hebrew Scripture: We are all descended from the same single, original human being, Adam, created *btzelem Elohim*, in God’s image, and thus endowed by our Creator with the same inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Of course, our founding fathers did not value every man, let alone woman, equally. But we Jews did, at least as an ideal. Centuries ago, our rabbinic sages put it this way: “One Adam was created to prove that no one’s blood is redder than another’s... If you take one life, you destroy an entire world. If you save one life, you save an entire world.”

We Jews have been assigned by God as the *or hagoyim*, “a light unto the nations,” to help further these foundational values, found in Hebrew Scripture, of the innate equality of every human being, the respect due God’s gift of diversity,ⁱⁱⁱ

and the rule of law that demands everyone, citizen and stranger, rich and poor, be afforded equal justice before the law.^{iv}

Our ancient Sage Hillel taught, (PA 1:14): *If I am not for myself, who will be; if I am only for myself, what am I, and if not now when?*

That means supporting our Black neighbors even as we explain and advocate for our own concerns, building a two-way relationship of trust, as we did in our ICJS class and continue to do in our Courageous Conversations. That means protecting and advocating for Jews of color. And that means explaining to the public, to our own young people, and to Black leaders why supporting the anti-Israel BDS movement and having included BDS in BLM's original national platform is anti-Semitic. It's not because BDS criticizes Israel. Many of us legitimately criticize what the government of Israel does. Support for BDS is anti-Semitic because BDS demonizes, delegitimizes and applies a double standard to Israel which it does not do to other countries.

Ever since a particularly jarring anti-Israel eruption happened at an interfaith gathering on bias we were sponsoring participants of several years ago, I have been working with our local Black partners to help them understand why we believe the original BLM national platform's support of BDS is anti-Semitic and a strain on our historic partnership. I am happy to report that the Black Lives Matter national movement is reevaluating its BDS stand. There is no mention of BDS in the national platform summary Black Lives Matter released, as the work on the full platform continues.^v We hope the public support of BLM by our mainstream Jewish defense organizations as ADL and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, as well as our own Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, will encourage these revisions in the new proposed BLM platform.

I encourage you to join our next round of Courageous Conversations this spring because we Jews need not only to hear our Black neighbor's pain and experience but they equally need to hear about ours, specifically what it is like, even for those of us who enjoy white privilege, to live as a minority in a majority Christian nation and why even an imperfect Israel is important to us.

We each have a story to tell. It is only in sharing all of our stories that we hopefully can create the kind of bridges of understanding that help build a safer, kinder and more just society.

Who lives, who dies and who tells the story matters more than we may think.

Our ancestors who came to these shores worked and struggled to contribute to this nation even as they built their families and the American Jewish community. Jews have been part of every great undertaking since the American Revolution and every social movement that sought to advance the ideals which inspired this nation's founding. But we still have such a long way to go to realize what we can be together. If not now, when?

The play *Hamilton* ends with these words sung by Hamilton's wife Eliza: “
... And when my time is up
Have I done enough?
Will they tell your story?”

Have we done enough?

When our time is up and we face the Heavenly Court to account for how we conducted ourselves in this world, will we be able to say we had done enough?

Shanah Tovah.

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ⁱⁱ Cooper, Howard, "You Shall Love Your Neighbour as Yourself": Ideal and Reality." *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 16, no. 2 (1982): 3. Accessed September 3, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41431108>.

ⁱⁱⁱ E.g., Genesis 1:24 (the diversity of the animal world) and Genesis 1:26 (all humanity descended from the same single ancestor, Adam) on which the Babylonian Talmud in Sanhedrin 38a comments, “The Blessed One shaped all human beings from the divine image yet not one of them resembles the other (transl. Soncino).”

^{iv} E.g., Leviticus 24:22 (that there is one law for citizen and stranger) and Leviticus 19:15 (that neither rich nor poor be granted advantage before the law).

^v Ben Sales, “New Movement for Black Lives Platform Contains No Mention of Israel,” *Jerusalem Post* (August 29, 2020). <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/new-movement-for-black-lives-platform-contains-no-mention-of-israel-640351>.