

Bearing the Weight of Racism
First Day Rosh Hashanah, 2020
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The mahzor tells us: *hayom harat olam*, that today the world was born. For those of us here in person, surrounded by water and tall trees, the serenity of nature, we can feel the blessing of our beautiful world. But just as we feel the passage and pressure of time as we cross the threshold from year to year, so does the world around us. Damaging storms in the south, terrible fires in the west, and a pandemic that has spread across the globe all make us painfully aware of how fragile our world can be, and what a blessing each day is.

An interesting bit of cultural comparison is that while our secular culture focuses on the date that we are born, our Jewish culture focuses on the date of our death. In America we mark Washington's birthday, but in Israel it is always the *yahrzeit*, not the birthday, that goes on the calendar, whether it is King David (6 Sivan) or Yitzhak Rabin (12 Heshvan). The only birthday that is traditionally celebrated on the Jewish calendar is the bar and bat mitzvah. And then the world's birthday on Rosh Hashanah. Perhaps we can think of it as whether we tend to look back to when we were young, or look forward to when we will be older than we are. Maybe the disinterest in birthdays in Jewish tradition is to help us remain focused on the here and now, to make each day count, to make every day special.

Marking a birthday calls for an accounting. When we blow out the candles we make a wish. As children we wish for things we don't have, whereas when we reach the maturity of adulthood we tend to wish to keep the things we do have. The folk tradition of making a wish is rooted in the idea that things line up for us on our birthdays and we can "cash in"—in a sense—on our merits.

We like to know who shares our birthdays. I know I share mine with Johann Sabastian Bach. We also like to know what happened on our birthdays. The New York Times publishes a "birthday volume" of their front pages through the years on specific dates, which Alla and I and my brothers and sisters-in-law recently bought for our parents on each of their birthdays. As a World War I buff I am painfully aware that the German army launched its final major offensive on the western front on my birthday in 1918, an offensive which led to the German defeat setting in place a course of history that led to disaster for our people and the world two decades later. I used to think that that was bad enough.

But then I was reading Isabel Wilkerson's book, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, a very powerful, emotional and solidly grounded study of the history of race division in our country flowing from its roots in the legacy of slavery. As we have witnessed, and some of us have participated in, what has been the largest protest movement in American history, I spent time reading Wilkerson's beautiful but painful book. I have always thought of myself as a patriotic American, which makes coming to face with the diseases and sins of our country so much more difficult. One important point Wilkerson makes about American history is that while the North won the military conflict of the Civil War, the South won the peace. The triumph of old Southern culture lived on through the Jim Crow years, through the seventeen hundred monuments to the Confederacy that dot our country including 230 memorials specifically to Robert E. Lee, spread through the North as well as the South. I used to explain away the persistence of what we might call "Southern honor" by understanding the Civil War as a conflict about nationalism and federalism, the second part to the Revolution that established the unified nation that we like to think of ourselves as living in. Maybe. But Wilkerson insists that the purpose of the Confederacy was to maintain what was and is essentially a caste system, with Americans of African descent occupying the lowest,

subordinate position. As a prooftext she cites a speech of Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, who said of his new nation:

Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition (p. 335).

Those words were so chilling to read that I flipped to the endnotes to look up the source. There I learned that he gave what was titled “Cornerstone Speech” in 1861 on my birthday.

That was a chilling coincidence, and it made me feel that I somehow bore the weight of systemic racism on my shoulders. And I imagine that was the reaction that Isabel Wilkerson was going for.

More and more politicians and other leaders have begun to understand racism as a, or the, foundational sin of our country. Gary Anderson, a biblical scholar from Notre Dame, writes in his book on the biblical understanding of sin: “Human sins have consequences. When individuals disobey moral law, a tangible form of evil is created in the world that must be accounted for. And this is even more true when a whole society goes astray. One recalls the horrible sin of slavery in this country....It is a demonstrable fact that American culture has paid deeply for this travesty and continues to do so” (*Sin: A History*, p. 54). For how long, then, will we continue to bear the weight of this sin?

We carry the weight of the tragedies driven by race-based prejudice. A man shot in his own home for being mistaken as an intruder. A man dying before a crowd on the street, pleading for air with his last breaths. These stories are terrible. But there are also more subtle stories about endemic racism that Wilkerson weaves together in her book, *Caste*. The story about the graduate student who was awoken from her nap in a lounge at Yale University when police were called. Or the five black women who apparently inspired a golf club in Pennsylvania to call the police because they were golfing too slowly. Or the African American man who was accused by a white woman in the Milwaukee parking lot by his office of trying to break into his own car. Or the African American woman married to a cardiologist who, when she rang her new neighbor’s door to welcome him to the neighborhood he cut her off and said he would give her his laundry thinking she was from the local dry cleaner. Or the Chicago professor who, as he held his cycling gear in his hand and leafed through his mail, was accused by a fellow resident riding the elevator with him of opening a parcel he was apparently there to deliver. There are too many of these stories.

Throughout her book, Isabel Wilkerson compares the story of African Americans to the Indian caste system as well as to the experience of the Jews in Nazi Germany. One of her concluding vignettes describes the shock and disappointment of Albert Einstein, after escaping the antisemitism of the Nazis, then encountering racial prejudice at Princeton. He described such prejudice as a “disease” and explained how, “being a Jew myself, perhaps I can understand and empathize with how black people feel as victims of discrimination” (p. 379).

In ten days, on Yom Kippur, we will hear from the Torah the law of the scapegoat, how the high priest would lay his hands on the head of the goat, transferring to the goat the sins of Israel, and then sending the goat away into the wilderness. The ritual paints a picture of the biblical idea of sin, that it was a weight that we would bear on our shoulders until we could lay it down on someone else. The original scapegoat was not itself guilty, it was simply the bearer of all our sins. One of the striking points of the Mishnah in tractate Yoma that deals with the laws of Yom Kippur, is the description of the ancient priests pushing the scapegoat over a cliff to make sure that it died. To have it simply wander into the wilderness was not enough for the later rabbis. They needed to know that the goat died, and the sins of Israel with it. They wanted to eliminate the slate of sins, not just send them off, or, as we might say, sweep them under the rug.

Would that we had such a ritual to make our sins disappear. Einstein was right in empathizing with the victims of racism and prejudice. But he could afford an analytical role, because he was not American. But we are. Being Jewish does not alleviate us of the responsibility, of the onus, of carrying the weight of American transgression.

Let me read to you a passage from Wilkerson. This is actually how she begins the book. It's called "The Man in the Crowd."

There is a famous black-and-white photograph from the era of the Third Reich. It is a picture taken in Hamburg, Germany, in 1936, of shipyard workers, a hundred or more, facing the same direction in the light of the sun. They are heiling in unison, their right arms rigid in outstretched allegiance to the Führer.

If you look closely, you can see a man in the upper right who is different from the others. His face is gentle but unyielding. Modern-day displays of the photograph will often add a helpful red circle around the man or an arrow pointing to him. He is surrounded by fellow citizens caught under the spell of the Nazis. He keeps his arms folded to his chest, as the stiff palms of the others hover just inches from him. He alone is refusing to salute. He is the one man standing against the tide.

Looking back from our vantage point, he is the only person in the entire scene who is on the right side of history. Everyone around him is tragically, fatefully, categorically wrong. In that moment, only he could see it.

His name is believed to have been August Landmesser. At the time, he could not have known the murderous path the hysteria around him would lead to. But he had already seen enough to reject it.

He had joined the Nazi Party himself years before. By now though, he knew firsthand that the Nazis were feeding Germans lies about Jews, the outcasts of his era, that, even this early in the Reich, the Nazis had caused terror, heartache, and disruption. He knew that Jews were anything but Untermenschen, that they were German citizens, human as anyone else. He was an Aryan in love with a Jewish woman, but the recently enacted Nuremberg Laws had made their relationship illegal. They were forbidden to marry or to have sexual relations, either of which amounted to what the Nazis called "racial infamy."

His personal experience and close connection to the scapegoated caste allowed him to see past the lies and stereotypes so readily embraced by susceptible members—the majority, sadly—of the dominant caste. Though Aryan himself, his openness to the humanity of the people who had been deemed beneath him gave him a stake in their well-being, their fates tied to his. He could see what his countrymen chose not to see.

In a totalitarian regime such as that of the Third Reich, it was an act of bravery to stand firm against an ocean. We would all want to believe that we would have been him. We might feel certain that, were

we Aryan citizens under the Third Reich, we surely would have seen through it, been that person resisting authoritarianism and brutality in the face of mass hysteria.

We would like to believe that we would have taken the more difficult path of standing up against injustice in the defense of the outcast. But unless people are willing to transcend their fears, endure discomfort and derision, suffer the scorn of loved ones and neighbors and co-workers and friends, fall into disfavor of perhaps everyone they know, face exclusion and even banishment, it would be numerically impossible, humanly impossible, for everyone to be that man. What would it take to be him in any era? What would it take to be him now (pp. xv-xvii)?

That struck me as a beautiful but haunting meditation on human nature, a subject which I will return to tomorrow and on Yom Kippur. For now, let's think about what this says about the nature of sin. The man in the photograph, August Landmesser, was not without sin. He was, or had been, a Nazi, and helped vote them into power. But even more so, as a German he inherits the weight of sin around him. But he took his stand. Would we take ours?

In the Unetaneh Tokef prayer that we will soon recite, we mark that *teshuvah utefillah utzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hagezeirah*, that repentance, prayer and charity will annul the evil decree. We should understand this key passage of the high holiday liturgy as follows: the first step is self-reflection and understanding of the sins we carry on our shoulders. Then we must say them aloud, speaking their names in prayer. But finally, we must perform acts of justice, which is what *tzedakah* really means. Only then can we liberate ourselves from bearing those heavy burdens.

Empathy is the beginning, followed by communication and finally, action. Rosh Hashanah is called the birthday of the world, but it is also called the Day of Judgment. On a birthday we take account of ourselves, we look at where we came from and make decisions about where we are going. Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, said what he said on my birthday. Okay, that was 112 years before I was born, but I have still lived with the legacy of that worldview for the years from my date of birth until today. What is more important is how I live from now going forward, in how I live and act. Let us all live and act with greater justice following this birthday of the world, so that we may greet each other in a better world next year. Shanah tovah.