

America's Original Sin

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Shalom. My name is Barry, and I'm a racist.

No, I'm not going to bomb an African American church or burn a cross on anybody's lawn. I don't use the "n-word," and I would never knowingly judge people by the color of their skin.

That kind of racism is rare, though sadly not dead, in 2015 America.

At a deeper level, as I've learned from Rabbi Jason Rosenberg, racism is very much alive, in you and in me, every day. No, we're not terrible people. Given the choice, we will avoid racism.

Rabbi Rosenberg reminds me that we can no more free ourselves of our internal racist bias, however mild, than we can expel *yetzer ha-ra*, our temptation to do evil. Our sages teach that each and every one of us is as plagued by that wicked inclination as we are blessed by *yetzer tov*, our preference for doing the right thing. No matter how successful our penitence this Yom Kippur, when it's over, we will still be tempted to sin. Moreover, in Rabbi Rosenberg's words: "Like every good devil character in literature, *yetzer ha-ra* is subtle. It doesn't work primarily by shouting obviously unacceptable things. It works in quiet, sneaky ways. If it didn't," we would more easily overcome it. He offers evidence of the subtle way that our *yetzer ha-ra*, in the form of racism, "hides, but still leaves traces."

"An experiment was done with job-hunting sites. Identical pairs of resumes were submitted with only one change – the names. One version would have a name like John Brown. The other something more 'black' sounding, like Jawaan Brown. . . . [T]he 'white' named resumes had significantly more inquiries than the otherwise identical 'black' ones. A recent analysis of professional baseball scouts shows that white players are more likely to be described as 'intelligent' and 'hard-working,' while black players are more often called 'naturally athletic' and 'instinctive.' These recruiters and scouts weren't vicious racists. They were just ordinary, decent people," like you and me, "who were being tripped up by the simple bias which is *yetzer ha-ra* whispering in our ears."

Recently, I acquired a new role model, a woman who is doing a better job than most of us of overcoming that instinctive bias. I met Keshia Thomas on

America's Journey for Justice. Keshia walked all day, every day, for forty days, with the NAACP's trek from Selma, Alabama, to Washington, D.C. She could have shouted, "Black lives matter;" but she didn't. Ever. Instead, she proclaims: "All lives matter."

Those words aren't just a slogan to Keshia. You see, twenty years ago, when she was just eighteen, Keshia was protesting against a Ku Klux Klan rally. Suddenly, amidst Keshia's group, a man was discovered, wearing a white-supremacist t-shirt and covered in racist tattoos. The anti-Klan crowd began to attack the man, knocking him to the ground. Keshia threw herself on top of the man, protecting his life with her own body. She saved a man who was there to denigrate Keshia and everybody like her.

If only we were all like Keshia. But we're not. Statistics are clear: African Americans are more likely to be stopped for routine traffic violations than the rest of us. Once stopped, they're more likely to be frisked. The deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and Sandra Bland and . . . are more shocking than they are surprising. No, I don't imagine that the police were always in the wrong, nor that all the officers involved were any more racist than the average American. Still, none of us may imagine that we live in a post-racist America.

Indeed, racism is America's Original Sin.

Last month, marching for racial justice in Georgia, I met a man named Middle Passage. Middle carried the American flag every day of that march, all the way from Alabama to northern Virginia, where he suffered a heart attack and died just days away from the Journey's end in our nation's capital. Middle Passage is the name this disabled veteran took for himself to bring attention to America's Original Sin. The Middle Passage was the principal slave trade route to American shores. Kidnapped African men and women were shackled into ships, countless among them dying during the voyage, the survivors meeting a fate arguably worse than death. Explaining his name change, Middle told me, "You have to know where you've come from to know where you're going." As a nation, to understand where we are, we must confront the sin that accompanied our founding.

Slavery was the violent subjugation, the forced relocation, and the body-and-soul-crushing exploitation of generations of Africans brought to these American shores over hundreds of years. A century and a half after abolition –

even after the Civil War and Reconstruction, even after the Civil Rights Movement – we live with the legacy of slavery and the oppression that followed it.

Some people argue that America is now free of its Original Sin. As a result, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is being dismantled, equal education is no more than a slogan; and, all too often, African Americans lack equal protection under the law.

No sooner did the Supreme Court rule that we no longer needed a robust Voting Rights Act than some state legislatures began making voting more difficult for minorities. They closed polling places in African American neighborhoods, redistricted to dilute minority strength, made voter registration more difficult, and reduced early voting days at the expense of working people. Arkansas attempted a voter identification law, supposedly to correct imaginary voter fraud but really to make the polls less accessible to the poor.

If I believed that educational opportunity in America were equal and our schools desegregated, I was disabused of that fantasy when I walked into Romine Elementary School on our own city's southwest side, no more than a fifteen minute drive from here. I walked out knowing that only some Central Arkansas schools are integrated. Children on the southwest side do not have the same opportunity as our own, despite Romine's fine faculty and leadership.

Drive John Barrow Road, south of 630, with open eyes, and you will be forced to admit that the Fair Housing Act is an important legal innovation but no more. How many African Americans live on your block?

And equal protection under the law? Mass incarceration of Black men, well out of proportion to that group's law breaking, should be enough to convince us that our criminal justice system is unfair. Unlike Keshia Thomas, we must proclaim, "Black lives matter," because in too much of this nation, they do not.

Our nation lives with the after-effects of America's Original Sin every day, because we have never completed our atonement. We must repent, each and every one of us, as our High Holy Day liturgy teaches us to do: with *teshuvah*, turning things around; with *t'filah*, prayers for our nation's healing; with *zedakah*, sacrificial acts of giving that restore justice.

“Repentance.” The Hebrew word is *teshuvah*, which literally means, “turning around.” We face long overdue, red blood *teshuvah*, starting with each of us personally.

How many of us enjoy deep and meaningful relationships with more than one or two African Americans? We cannot imagine what it’s like to be afraid of the police without committing a crime. We do not warn our children not to wear certain kinds of sweatshirts. We do not worry that our children could do everything right and still die at the hands of police.

Action is critical, but I’ve learned that it’s not enough, so prayer is part of the equation. We do need God’s help, since no heart is entirely free of prejudice. We need God to reach into our hearts, to help us identify our own discomfort, our own unintended discrimination, and our own biases. Prayer alone cannot end racism, but it can help to root out its vestiges in the heart that desires healing.

The final component required is *tzedakah*. That word is used to mean “charity,” but its implication is much greater. *Tzedakah* is “justice.” Our ancestors brought sacrifices to the Temple, to come clean with God, to balance out their sins justly. We must give sacrificially to expunge America’s Original Sin.

White America has been unwilling to sacrifice its privilege to make room for minorities. Affirmative Action is the starkest example. As the places of white athletes were sacrificed when African Americans were invited onto elite playing fields, so must the places of white students and job applicants be sacrificed for the African American who faces racism, subtle and otherwise, every day.

Unlike Christianity, which teaches that Original Sin will plague humanity until the end of days, Judaism teaches, each Yom Kippur, that we can put our sins behind us.

America’s Journey for Justice gave me hope.

Over the last several decades, the Black-Jewish alliance has been frayed. Sometimes, we have differed over Israel. Sometimes, Affirmative Action has been the sticking point. The Civil Rights Movement paid huge dividends to Jews. Once the law prohibited discrimination, we experienced progress much more quickly than Black America.

Still, on the Journey for Justice, only one group of clergy was always present: Reform rabbis were there, marching, every single day.

Powerfully, the march was led by two symbols: the American flag, borne by Middle Passage; and the Torah, most often carried by rabbis, with African Americans and other marchers also eager to take a turn. Our flag and our Torah give me hope.

Middle Passage carried the flag because, though his very name reminded all of America's Original Sin, Middle was a military veteran and grandfather who believed in our nation's future. We carry the Torah, because we know what it teaches: "Justice, Justice, shall you pursue."

Our ancient rabbis focus on that last word, "pursue." We cannot wait for justice to come to us. Now is the time for repentance. Now is the time for justice. Today is the day to change our ways and America's, so that we may finally relegate slavery to the memorial museum where it belongs. Today is the day to pray for justice, that every vestige of racism may be expunged from our hearts. Today and tomorrow, let our sacrifice be for justice, and then may America fulfill its greatest promise.

Amen.