Sermon for Yom Kippur 5778 September 30, 2017
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Do Not Stand By

What if I were responsible for the death of another human being? Would I repent? Would I confess? Would I strive, somehow, in some way to make things right? Would I pledge to never, ever do something like that again? And what if I were somehow responsible for the deaths and the shortened lives of hundreds, of thousands? How would I begin to cope with that horrifying knowledge? Would I react with horror? Would I throw myself into an examination of how this possibly could have happened? Would I work to reverse whatever malevolent force was linking me to such terrible consequences?

We are here today to think about life, what it means and how we should live it, how the gift of life obligates us. And, as a counterweight, we are also here to think about death, the frightening prospect of our own deaths, the sad fact of the deaths of those we have loved, and the harsh reality of the deaths of countless others, our neighbors in this city and around the country. What meaning do these deaths hold for us? What responsibility do we have for them? How do they obligate us? In the past year, as we have been shaken by deaths caused by horrific events close by and far away, I have again and again invoked a verse from the Torah, a verse that we will read this afternoon: *Lo ta'amod 'al dam re'echa* – "Do not stand by the blood of your neighbor."[1] From acts of terrorism to mass shootings to the deaths of black people at the hands of police, this *mitzvah*, this commandment about our neighbor's blood, has rung in my mind. It seems to call out the essential message of Yom Kippur, maybe the essential message of being Jewish: we are responsible. We cannot evade or explain away our ties to the deaths of others. And that means facing some difficult truths about ourselves.

This verse sits in the middle of the Holiness Code, a set of instructions about how we as humans can be holy, since our job on earth is to emulate God, who is Holy. And the words I have quoted so often are actually only half of the verse. The full verse reads: "Do not walk about as a gossip among your people; do not stand by the blood of your neighbor; I am the Lord." The verse is prohibiting two things; one, gossip, involves movement and action, while the other is all about inaction. Whatever it means to "stand by the blood of your neighbor," the Torah is decrying a failure to act. In the Talmud, the ancient rabbis understand the force of the verse this way:

> From where do we know that if you see your fellow human being drowning, mauled by beasts, or attacked by robbers, you are bound to save them? From the verse, "You shall not stand by the blood of your neighbor."[2]

[1] Leviticus 19:16.
[2] Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 73a.

The Talmud's version of this mitzvah seems to be, "Do not just stand there while the blood of your neighbor is being shed! Do something!" There are two important things to notice about this Talmudic interpretation. First, for the rabbis, this *mitzvah* does not distinguish between Jews and non-Jews; it is not about Jews saving Jews but about the Jewish obligation to save any human being whose life is in danger. Second, all of the situations imagined by the Talmud in which we are obligated to act involve at least some degree of risk to ourselves. We can drown trying to save someone from drowning, we can be mauled by the beasts from which we are trying to save others, and we can be robbed and beaten by the very robbers whose intended victims we are attempting to help. So this is not a *mitzvah* to take lightly, and the Talmud goes on to teach that we are required to expend all of our resources, physical and material, in order to save a human life. This is a very, very heavy responsibility. So it is not surprising that we are resistant to shouldering it, because it does involve facing hard truths. Today, I want to talk about three of those truths: about hate, about violence, and about racial injustice.

It is hard to face the truth that we live in a world that is as full of hate as it is full of love. And sometimes, as I talked about on Rosh Hashanah, we minimize or even replicate that hate rather than counteracting it. We have recently seen hate come to the surface in horrific terrorist acts in this country, bringing home the terror that we have seen afflicting people around the world. Yet we have seen a disturbing pattern in the reactions of politicians and other public figures to these incidents. Again and again, they have responded by repeating false claims that foreigners and illegal immigrants are committing the vast majority of these acts, and they have cynically used them as an opportunity to promote a harsh clampdown on both legal and illegal immigration. We have seen the results in the succession of discriminatory "travel bans" put into place over the past year, as well as the recent restriction of legal immigration of refugees to a level far below what is needed to fulfill our humanitarian obligations in the world. At the same time, if the attack does not fit into the false narrative that terrorism is the result of foreign – especially Muslim – "incursions" into the U.S., public figures have downplayed – or even outright denied – that hate had anything to do with it, calling it instead the act of "a deranged individual" and for greater awareness of mental illness. We have seen a public discourse that does everything but focus on the hate that is infecting this country and spreading around the world, hate that includes Jews as prominent targets, and we have let that happen. We have seen that instead of opposing, countering, and eradicating hate, it is being redirected against innocent targets, and we have let that happen. We have seen misguided measures put into place that will not reduce terrorism but will increase the divisions and hatreds that drive it, both within and inside the U.S., and we have let that happen. We have stood by as the blood of our neighbors has been shed, and we are responsible.

Another hard truth we have to face is that we live in a society suffused with violence, in one of the most violent countries in the world. Guns alone kill tens of thousands of people in the U.S. each year, and every year we see hundreds of mass shootings in schools, shopping malls, and businesses that take hundreds of innocent lives. Our rate of deaths from violence dwarfs that of most countries in the world, and I have met many Europeans and scores of Israelis who are shocked by the level of danger that we take for granted as the price of living in this society. There is no mystery as to why the streets of the U.S. have become so dangerous. The "right to bear arms" enshrined in the Constitution has been distorted and twisted to support the idea that no restrictions at all can ever be placed on gun owners, gun manufacturers, or gun hardware. We have seen politicians of all stripes and lobbyists for the gun industry insist that the mentally ill, terrorism suspects, and perpetrators of domestic abuse should have an absolute right to buy as many guns as they want, and we have stayed silent. We have seen common-sense changes to gun manufacturing and hardware, like mandatory trigger locks and restrictions on silencers, armor-piercing bullets, and military-style semi-automatic weapons – whose only purpose is killing as many people as possible – rejected hysterically as a violation of "freedom," and we have stayed silent. We have seen the Congress of the United States, after we have been drenched in the blood of young children dying from gun violence, and when polls show overwhelming support for change, refuse to enact a single piece of gun control legislation, and we have stayed silent. We have stood by as the blood of our neighbors has been shed, and we are responsible.

Yet another hard truth, maybe the hardest of all for us to face, is that we live in a racist society, in a country founded and built on racism, a place where structural discrimination against people of color is the water in which we swim, the air that we breathe. America's "original sin" of racism has, sadly, not gradually been displaced and disappeared as we might have hoped and dreamed that it would. Despite a Civil War that killed over 600,000 people in the 19th century, despite the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century, and despite the first black president and the Black Lives Matter movement in the 21st century, racial injustice is still deeply imbedded in American life. This is not about whether you or I or the president of the United States personally like or don't like people of different skin colors, and it's not about our individual feelings about any particular group. This is about a structure of oppression that flows through us and around us and shapes how we live.

The racial injustice of our society has many aspects, but I'm just going to mention two of them today: education and mass incarceration. As many studies, including a recent analysis by GJC member David Mosenkis, have shown, there is massive inequality in funding for education in Pennsylvania, and it falls largely along racial lines. School districts that educate a high percentage of black children, like right here in Philadelphia, receive far less funding than their white counterparts. This is a trend that is replicated

throughout the country. 63 years after Brown vs. Board of Education forced desegregation, schools have begun to re-segregate, with municipalities breaking away to form new school districts to exclude black children from white tax dollars and to relegate them to poorly funded schools of their own. Poor education leads to poor job prospects, which leads to poor health, which leads directly to early death. We sit here today in Mt. Airy, an integrated neighborhood, but most neighborhoods of Philadelphia are still largely segregated, and we can see shocking differences in life expectancy between those neighborhoods – up to a 20 year difference in life expectancy between black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods. Racial injustice in education is not just wrong; it is deadly. And what are we doing to stop it?

Mass incarceration has caused overwhelming devastation to black communities, who are subject to incarceration at rates way out of proportion to their percentage of the population. We live in the country with the highest rate of incarceration in the world, and in the city, Philadelphia, with the highest rate of incarceration in the country. Twenty percent of Philadelphians – one in five – have served time. Mass incarceration has emptied whole communities of young black men, who, again, studies show, are more likely to be arrested, more likely to be convicted, and more likely to be sentenced to longer terms than their white counterparts. This is not accidental, and the old racist lies that permeate our culture – that black people are somehow inherently less industrious, less intelligent, and more violent than white people – are just disgusting attempts to cover up the ways in which the structures of our justice system are begin used to control black bodies and deny black people the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness supposedly guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Again, this is not just wrong, and it's not just immoral. It's not just that it goes against all that Jewish tradition teaches about a world of precious human beings made in the image of God. We have all seen, again and again, sometimes in painful, graphic video, unarmed black people being shot and killed by police officers with few or no consequences for the officers involved. These are lives directly loss to the structural racism of our criminal justice system. But mass incarceration also is a matter of life and death. Prison takes years away from the lives of those incarcerated and devastates the lives of their families as well. Racial injustice leads directly to the deaths of thousands right here in our own city. And we, and all who live in this society, are responsible.

As you probably know, today, on Yom Kippur, there is large March for Racial Justice in Washington, D.C., and some members of our congregation are there right now. Although I, along with many others, was disappointed that the march was scheduled for this day, my heart is with those who are standing against racial injustice today and every day. It is not easy to stand for justice in the world. It is not popular, and it can put us at risk, just as the rabbis of the Talmud imagined. But as the words of Isaiah reminded us just now, our individual actions to address injustice matter deeply,

matter to God, matter as much as our fasting and our praying. We are required to take action, because we are responsible.

Hatred, violence, and racism are causing the deaths of our neighbors every day. And we can't just stand by as their blood is spilled. Today, we have to accept our responsibility. And we have to do what we would do if we were directly responsible for a death. First, we have to repent. We have to face the hard truths, the gaps between our highest values and the reality of what we have done and not done, what is happening around us with our implicit or explicit consent. Second, we have to confess. Alongside the words of the traditional confessional that we will recite many times today, we need to verbalize, even if only within the silence of our hearts, our failure to see blood being spilled because of our inaction, our standing still. Third, we need to work toward change, advocating, marching, and speaking, calling out hate and violence and racism where we see them around us and doing our utmost to eradicate them in ourselves and in our world. And last, we need to pledge today, here and now, that this will not happen again – that we will not stay silent, that we will not simply allow these things to happen, that we will not just stand by.

The Yizkor service that we are about to recite asks us remember all of our dead, those we loved and knew intimately along with those unknown ones who we take into our hearts with our own. Let us commit, in the memory of all of the dead, to work against hate, to work against violence, to work against the racial injustice that infects our society. Because we are standing by as our neighbors' blood is shed. And we are responsible.