

White Supremacy and Us

Racism. Antisemitism. White supremacy. White nationalism. Hate speech. Bias. Discrimination. Vandalism. Graffiti. Insults. Assault. Arson. Shootings. Mass murder.

This is where we are in our world. This is where we are in our country. This is where we are in our state and city. This is where we are in our own community. Not someone else. Not somewhere else. Not in theory. Us. Here. Now. In reality.

How did we get here? On this day, when we think back to *harat 'olam*, the birthday of the world, what has brought us from the vision of Eden to this place of brokenness? How can we trace the human trajectory from the creation of a single person to a whole world full of people who not only deny the humanity of others but also go so far as to defame and attack and kill them to show, somehow, their superiority? How can we make sense of a world that seems to have veered so far from the values of Torah that we claim guide us, while we stand by? And what can we do?

In the beginning, according to Torah, humanity started with a single human being; at its origin, humanity, like God, was one. “And God created the human being in the divine image; in the image of the divine God created it; male and female God created them.”¹ The ancient rabbis noticed that the Torah states BOTH that human beings started with a single individual AND that male and female were created at the same moment, neither privileged over the other. How could this be? In the midrash, interpretations of the Torah from over 1,500 years ago, Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar argues that the full range of gender identity was contained within the first human being: “At the moment that the Holy Blessed One created the first human, God created it with non-binary gender, as it is said, ‘male AND female God created them’”² – and yes, the Torah’s use of “them” to refer to a single human of non-binary gender is just what the text says! Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani argues instead that the first human held the potential for either end of the gender spectrum: “At the moment that the Holy One created the first human, God created it with two faces and placed them back to back” – only later, according to the midrash, were they separated into the genders with which we are now so familiar.³

Why are the ancients so concerned to demonstrate that every human originated from a single individual? Why do they insist that even differentiation in gender identity, something used for centuries to divide and discriminate against people, was not present in that first human? Only for the sake of creating peace among us, the descendants of that primordial being. As it is written in the Mishnah: “[A single person was created] for the sake of peace among humankind, that one should not say to another, ‘My parent was greater than your

¹ Genesis 1:27.

² Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 8:1.

³ Ibid.

parent.”⁴ If we all recognize that we have a common origin, the theory goes, then we should all recognize that creating hierarchy among us is a pointless exercise. We are all literally brothers and sisters, or, by now, distant cousins, the products of a single ancestor. And how could there be discrimination and conflict over status within a single family?? Sigh.

As we know, this didn’t work out so well even for the very first family, as the first siblings, Cain and Abel, clashed over whose offering they thought was accepted by God and whose rejected, who was symbolically closer to their Creator, leading to the very first murder, a fratricide, the harbinger of all horrors to come.⁵ Yet there is no intimation in the Torah that Cain killed Abel because of the type of human that Abel was, or that Cain claimed to come from a different people or tribe, or that Cain denied Abel’s humanity. Theirs was a conflict of intimates but not of groups; the first children could not deny that they shared a common descent. Even in today’s Torah reading, when Sarah cruelly demands that Hagar, literally “the stranger,” the Egyptian, be sent from the camp with Ishmael, banished to the cruelty of the wilderness, there is no explicit suggestion that Sarah’s enmity toward Hagar is because of her ethnicity or origin. A clash over resources and inheritance, a desire to eliminate a rival for her husband’s affections, or, in the most charitable light, a concern for the welfare of her son: these are all touched on as motivations for Sarah’s actions, but anything larger than that, anything referencing the kinds of group identities and hierarchies familiar in our world, remains in the background.

We do see explicit mention of such a hierarchy in the story of Sodom, where strangers as a group are singled out for mistreatment by the inhabitants of a town.⁶ When two angels arrive in the guise of strangers, Lot, Abraham’s nephew, distinguishes himself by offering them protection and hospitality, clearly not the norm in Sodom. A crowd of townspeople quickly gathers and demands that the strangers be given up to them, but Lot refuses. It’s very important to understand what happens next. When Lot urges the townsfolk to leave these strangers alone, they immediately identify him—a resident of the town for some time—as part of the out-group, one of the people to whom rights and protection do not apply. “They said, ‘This fellow came here as a stranger, and already he acts the ruler! Now we will deal worse with you than with them!’”⁷ By making common cause with strangers and offering them his protection, Lot gives up whatever thin veneer of security he had previously attained. Identifying with a fellow stranger puts Lot in such danger that angelic intervention is necessary to preserve his life.⁸ This is the power and the peril of splitting humanity into “us” and “them,”

⁴ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:2.

⁵ Genesis 4:1-9.

⁶ Genesis 19:4-5.

⁷ Genesis 19:9.

⁸ Genesis 19:10-11.

the earliest form of hierarchy and inequality we know, and one replicated several times in the book of Genesis to the detriment of Abraham and his family.⁹

The development of systematic inequality in the Torah accelerates as the Israelites descend into Egypt, first in the story of Joseph, who comes to Egypt not only as a stranger but also as a slave. Here we see to what extent a stranger's rights are not protected; they are subject to being transformed in an instant from human beings with their own agency into chattel—the property of another. Because Joseph is a stranger, he can be made a slave,¹⁰ and because he is a slave he can easily be falsely accused of a crime and imprisoned by his owners, apparently for life.¹¹ Even when he is released from prison on the whim of Pharaoh, he is valued only for his utility to the ruler.¹² No longer exactly a slave, he is still a stranger and is treated as such, separated by language and by food practices from the rest of Pharaoh's court, who, according to the Torah, found the idea of eating with a Hebrew “detestable.”¹³ What makes Joseph useful to Pharaoh and successful in the court is not, on the model of Lot, identifying with others whose position he shares. Instead, what makes Joseph useful is his ability to enable his overlords to tighten their grip on the material wealth of the country.¹⁴ Although Pharaoh does not enslave Joseph's body, he retains control over Joseph's mind, which seems to become obsessed with how to serve Pharaoh above anything else. By putting this stranger, still never truly accepted, into a seat of power, Pharaoh both uses Joseph's skills to his advantage and makes Joseph a convenient scapegoat for any blowback from the population at large. This pattern provides a model for anti-Jewish rulers and authorities that we see repeated throughout history and down to our own times.

The institutions of systematic inequality, group hatred, and slavery, with their attendant justifications, become even more highly developed in the Exodus story, so familiar to us from our celebrations of Pesach. But we often somehow miss the shocking parallels between the Israelites' descent into slavery and the operation of racism and antisemitism in our own time. It begins with the rise of a new Pharaoh who “did not know Joseph,”¹⁵ a ruler who conveniently forgets the work that Joseph did to support the regime. Then Pharaoh systematically goes about identifying the Israelites as both a foreign body within Egypt and a rapidly multiplying threat to the public, who, unlike Joseph, have no redeeming useful qualities. “[Pharaoh] said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise up from the land [against us].’”¹⁶ According to Pharaoh, the

⁹ For example, Abraham's difficult interactions with the ruler of Egypt (Genesis 12) and with the king of Gerar (Genesis 20) are marked by his concern about being a stranger who cannot expect that his family or his rights will be respected in a foreign place.

¹⁰ Genesis 39:1.

¹¹ Genesis 39:19-20.

¹² Genesis 41:39-40.

¹³ Genesis 43:32.

¹⁴ Genesis 47:20.

¹⁵ Exodus 1:8.

¹⁶ Exodus 1:9-10.

Israelites are a “fifth column,” a foreign force that has no loyalty to the state, whose very numbers and existence are a threat. The only way to respond to this imagined threat is to enslave them to take away their power,¹⁷ and when that doesn’t work, to kill them, beginning with the most vulnerable: babies.¹⁸

This is how a system of inequality is built, from Egypt down to the present day. First, a minority group is separated out from the majority, identified as strangers or foreigners, people who are not and never can be part of “us.” Then this group, highlighted and marked out through differences in dress, language, skin color, religion, or culture, is portrayed as somehow being a threat to the majority through their very existence; the irony that a dominant majority should see those it has the power to oppress as a threat seems to escape everyone’s notice. Finally, this threat is used as a justification for denying rights to the minority group, exploiting their labor, imprisoning them, enslaving them, and killing them. We can point to countless examples throughout history, but we hardly need to; we are seeing exactly these steps being put into action in our time against immigrants, against Jews, against Muslims, against African-Americans, and on and on, and it should come as no surprise to us that some of us fall into more than one of these categories. Systems of oppression are always in need of a minority group to identify, isolate, and oppress, and who the people in the group are, and whether they fit easily into the mold into which they are being cast, is mostly beside the point.

What effects does this experience have on the Israelites? First of all, they learn about the power of human resilience and resistance. From the midwives’ refusal to carry out Pharaoh’s murderous edict, to Pharaoh’s daughter’s defiance of her father in saving the baby Moses, to Moses himself coming to identify with the oppressed Hebrew slaves more than he does with his privileged upbringing, the Israelites see human beings standing in the way of the plans that oppressors make and the logic of oppression that they hope to impose on the people to get them to be complicit in their own enslavement.¹⁹ Second, the Israelites learn about God’s vision for humanity, a vision very different from that of the oppressor. In God’s dialogues with Moses about divine care for the oppressed and in God’s acts that strike against Pharaoh and his regime, God makes clear that Pharaoh’s framing of the Israelites and their place in society is only a self-serving bid for power. God counters Pharaoh’s oppressive ideology with the divine truths of justice, freedom, and love, truths that open the Israelites’ eyes and allow them, over a long period of time, to begin to recover from the lies they have been told about themselves, lies they had begun to believe, and to begin to see themselves as worthy of freedom. That it takes forty years of wandering in the wilderness, or even more, should be no surprise; we are all still struggling to comprehend those divine truths and to burn away the lies

¹⁷ Exodus 1:11.

¹⁸ Exodus 1:16.

¹⁹ The midrash imagines Pharaoh making believe that he is going to work alongside the Israelites, not enslave them: “The school of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, taught: [At first] they brought a brick mold and they hung it on the neck of Pharaoh [to create the appearance that he was also participating in the labor]. And each and every Jew who said to [the Egyptians]: I am a delicate person [and cannot participate in the labor], they said to them: Are you at all more of a delicate person than Pharaoh?!” (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11a).

that hold us back. Systems of oppression always are trying to enslave our minds as much as our bodies, and their pernicious effect on how we think is at least as important as their effect on how we act and are acted upon.

In the midst of their work to recover from generations of slavery, the Israelites had to guard against simply flipping the script and turning themselves from the oppressed into the oppressor. That is the context for the first instruction the Israelites are given after their encounter with God at Sinai: to regulate and constrict the practice of slavery, putting an end to lifetime servitude and mandating humane treatment of those who temporarily serve others.²⁰ The midrash makes clear that to enslave another human being is to act in defiance of God, since all people should primarily be serving God, not each other.²¹ But the Israelites have a hard time giving up their dreams of domination, dreams that are understandable given their history of trauma, but dreams that are completely at odds with the core vision of Torah. The Torah constantly reminds us that we should love the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt, and yet the Torah's narrative also includes condemnations of whole groups of non-Israelite peoples, particularly in the book of Deuteronomy, that seem antithetical to that teaching. The fact that the wholesale slaughter of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan called for in Deuteronomy never takes place gives us some comfort; even the Israelites could see that that was a bad idea. But we still see our ancestors struggle for the rest of the narrative of the Bible with finding a way to be secure and safe in the world while still honoring the stranger and respecting the integrity of other groups and nations, including minority groups within the kingdoms of Israel, something we continue to struggle with today.

With the end of Israelite rule over the land of Israel, the Jewish people return to their familiar role as a minority oppressed people, subject to the domination of the world powers that control the lands in which they live. Whether living in Persia, the Greek Empire, under the rule of Rome, or in the Christian or Muslim kingdoms of medieval Europe, we see familiar processes in play. Jews are set apart from other inhabitants of the lands in which they live, sometimes with special clothes they are required to wear.²² At the same time, some of the things that make Jews distinctive, from circumcision to Torah study to the refusal to give ultimate fealty to their human rulers, are outlawed as a threat to the state. Jews are denied the title of citizen, which from Rome on makes them second- or third-class residents of the places they have sometimes lived for generations. Jews are sometimes invited into powerful positions, only to be made into scapegoats if the policies of the state prove unpopular, and they are routinely blamed if misfortune should come upon the land. The typically tiny minority of Jews in any given land is often portrayed as an outsized threat to the established order. Under medieval Christian rule, the religious aspect of this threat often comes to the fore, leading not

²⁰ Exodus 21:2-6.

²¹ “For to Me the children of Israel are slaves’ [Leviticus 25:55], which indicates [that] they should not be slaves to slaves” (Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 22b).

²² The yellow stars that Jews were required to wear in Nazi-dominated countries during World War II were only the latest iteration of the practice of kingdoms and governments forcing Jews to mark themselves out as different by their clothing, a practice with a history that stretches back at least a thousand years.

only to the destruction wrought on European Jews by Crusaders on their way to battle the infidel but also to the horrors of the Inquisition. Jews are oppressed, attacked, tortured, forced to convert, accused of falsely converting, and killed in large numbers, again and again. This is the pattern we know, stretching from the end of the Biblical period through the 20th century.

Meanwhile, here in America, the “new world” of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, a different pattern is developing. America is becoming a magnet for Europeans who wish to escape the fixed social and political realities of the old world, to strike out and start something new, un beholden to the past. Unfortunately, as historians have shown us, this new land is being built on a very old model: the model of Egypt, the subjugation of both native peoples and Africans brought to these shores as slaves. The slave trade is what builds the economy of the English colonies, and when the Declaration of Independence heralds the new nation of the United States, systematic control and exploitation of native peoples and African slaves is at its foundation.²³ Even after the Civil War is fought and the North wins, even after the legal gains of the Civil Rights era, systematic oppression of black people and other ethnic and religious minorities remains baked into the reality, if not always the law, of these United States, and control of and discrimination against non-white people remains at the heart of its economy. Remember that the Nazis studied the Jim Crow south as the model for the disabilities placed on Jews in law and policy, tools of oppression passed back and forth between the old world of Europe and the new world of America, with decidedly old world effects.

At the same time, the U.S. develops another distinctive pattern. In a country of immigrants in which, other than the dominated and reservation-bound native peoples, no person or group has a long history, wave after successive wave of anti-immigrant fervor sweeps through American society. Second-generation Americans rail against those more recently arrived on these shores, and those who have managed to come and, at least to some extent, assimilate into the “melting pot” of America, labor mightily to close the door on those who seek to follow in their footsteps. When immigrants encounter a racist system of anti-immigrant bias, instead of following the pattern of Lot and identifying with those whose history they share, many tend to follow more closely the pattern of Joseph and identify with the oppressive system in which they find themselves, hoping to make it work for themselves by pushing down those with whom they might otherwise have found common cause. This, again, is no accident. Just as in Egypt, those in power encourage these divisions and discourage finding common ground so that minority groups don’t band together to resist the oppression of the majority.²⁴

So this is the America to which Jewish immigrants – many of our ancestors – arrive. And just like other immigrant groups before them, they find that the dream of escaping the entrenched social realities from which they came is both reality and illusion. The pattern they walk into is different, but its effects on Jews are initially much the same. Just as elsewhere,

²³ See, for example, Jill Lepore’s *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), especially “Part One: The Idea (1492-1799).”

²⁴ See the powerful description of the same practices in apartheid South Africa in Trevor Noah’s *Born A Crime* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2016).

Jews are set apart by their dress, their language, their religion, their customs. They are accused of carrying disease and contagion. Their loyalty to their new country is questioned and found wanting. They are discriminated against in employment and in housing. And yet, there is something different this time. Little by little, Jews start to make their way into America. It is not a complete transformation. There is still antisemitism, and Jews' status as part of a white majority is still embattled. But at least partially, in some situations, Jews begin to escape some of the disabilities placed on other minorities by the systematic oppression of the majority, and they instead begin to enjoy some of the privileges of majority status, even while in other situations they are marked out and discriminated against as before.

So that's our story. A traumatized people seeking safety in the US, walking into a society built on racism and oppression of minorities. Jews starting as non-white but then assimilating to some extent, achieving some of the privilege of whiteness, benefiting from the same inequality and discrimination that also has worked and continues to work against us. This is how racism works. It is, as we've seen, also how antisemitism works, elevating some Jews to positions of power while others are excoriated and attacked. Allowing some Jews into high places serves a dual function: it provides a bulwark against charges that antisemitism is rampant in the society, and it separates at least some Jews from those who would otherwise be their natural allies in other oppressed minority groups. Of course, having Jews in positions of power also strengthens the hands of antisemitic conspiracy theorists, since the small amount of Jewish power is heralded as evidence that Jews secretly control everything from banking to government around the world, one the most pervasive lies that antisemitism has told about us for at least the last 1,000 years, and one that is still in heavy circulation.²⁵

The multiple traumas that we experienced in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries—from pogroms to the Holocaust—have made Jews in America desperate with desire to believe that here, finally, we are safe. We have longed to see America as the counterweight to the long, “lachrymose” history of our people, the exceptional country that would allow us to be a people like any other people, not a people apart. To be fair, we have sometimes opened our eyes wide enough to see our common cause with the oppressed minorities of the United States, most notably with the black community in the 1960's. Many Jews—including many members of this community—were active in the civil rights struggle for fairness in housing and employment and achieved great things. But, as Lot learned in Sodom, identifying with those who are oppressed has a cost, and Jews have not always been willing to assume that cost. Instead, like Joseph, we have too often identified with the oppressors in an attempt to ensure our own security, leaving other minority groups to fend for themselves. Coming out of our historical trauma, and giving in to our very understandable desire to feel safe, we have too often been willing to close our eyes to both the racism that surrounds us and infects our communities and to the embers of antisemitism that are turning to flame all around us.

²⁵ See the data in ADL's Global Antisemitism Index at <https://global100.adl.org/about>, which documents the agreement of different populations with stereotypes about Jews such as “Jews have too much control over global affairs” and “Jews have too much control over the United States government.”

The year that has just passed, the year we remember today on this *Yom ha-Zikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, the year of 5779, has, horribly and painfully, forced our eyes wide open. The massacre of Jews in the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in October shocked and devastated us, all the more so in a community like ours with such strong ties to Squirrel Hill. When that was followed by the attack on the synagogue in Poway in April, even those of us who had not paid attention to the fact that the number of antisemitic attacks in the U.S. has doubled since 2015 began to think seriously about our safety as a Jewish community in this country. But the story of this past year is not just a story of antisemitism and attacks on Jews. Importantly, the murderer in Poway also claimed responsibility for setting a fire at a mosque, and he applauded the horrific mass murder of Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand that had just taken place in March. The confluence of attacks on African American churches, on American mosques, on immigrants, on LGBTQ people, and on others points to a larger and harder truth: minorities in this country are under attack from the forces of hate and intolerance, and Jewish communities are alongside all the rest.

In addition to realizing anew the effects of white supremacy on others and on American society writ large, we have also in this year painfully come to more of an understanding of how it has affected our own GJC community. We long to be a successful multi-ethnic, multi-racial Jewish community that celebrates that beautiful diversity as much as we celebrate the diverse ways of engaging with Judaism that we bring under one roof at GJC. We know that our future depends on our ability to welcome and engage Jews of every skin color, culture, and background. But the structural racism that is the water in which we swim and the ideology that can wend its way into our minds is keeping us from that goal. Too often, Jews of color who approach GJC or who are GJC members are excluded, ignored, viewed with suspicion, made to feel uncomfortable, and not treated as part of the “us” that is at the heart of our community. This is not because any person in this community wishes ill to anyone else; this is not an individual problem. It is a societal problem, a consequence of living in a society so thoroughly infused with racism that it is difficult for any of us to avoid having it unconsciously influence even the relationships within our community that are so precious to us.

So, facing this very difficult time, what can we do? One of the strengths of being a Jewish community is the very long history that is our inheritance. Faced with renewed evidence of white supremacy and structural racism in America, I have heard my older black Christian clergy colleagues comfort their congregants by saying, “We have seen this before.” They know that they have faced forces of hate before in their lifetimes and prevailed, and that gives them the strength and courage to confront the new face of this old challenge. The ancient rabbis, too, found comfort in finding parallels for their difficulties in the history of the generations that came before them. So we, too, can take comfort from saying, “We have seen this before.” We have seen it in America, we have seen it in Europe, we have seen it in Rome, we have seen it in Babylon, and we have seen it in Egypt. So we know what to do.

The first thing we have to do is to finally learn the hard lesson of Joseph. Abandoning those with whom we have common cause and cleaving to those in power in the mistaken belief

that they will protect us will never provide us with the security we need and deserve. We cannot be afraid that, as happened to Lot, our security will be imperiled by reaching out to others who are in danger. We should have learned by now that there is no safety in denying who we are and where we came from. And we also know now if we didn't before that white supremacy puts all us who are not both white and Christian in the same bucket of hate. We have to use that connection as a strength and not let ourselves be divided into weakness. There will only be safety and security for Jews in America when there is safety and security for all non-white, non-Christian people – for every minority group that is beset by that same process of dehumanization and separation that Pharaoh used on us in Egypt. We are all in this together, and none of us can win this fight alone. Very soon, we minorities will collectively become the majority in this country, and we need to do everything we can to shape the loving, tolerant, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious future that we can envision but that we are so far from realizing.

The second thing we have to do is to band together to free our bodies from threats to our safety. Just as the Israelites saw Shifra and Puah, Pharaoh's daughter, and Moses standing against unjust law and improper use of authority, we need to see and follow the leaders who are standing up not only against antisemitism but also against racial profiling, discriminatory policing, a racially biased justice system, a massively unjust immigration system, and the unconscionable killing of thousands of Americans, largely non-white people, at the hands of those wielding the largest arsenal of guns in any country on earth. Many of us at GJC are already involved in these struggles to create a world of safety, not just for those in positions of privilege but for everyone. But more of us need to take up this fight. This is not about partisanship and candidates and elections. This is about standing up for all of our rights to live in peace and not under threat. And let's not forget that, as a Jewish community, this is not only the right thing to do, it's also in our own self-interest. As long as minorities in America remain under threat, we, too, are under threat. We can and have taken what steps we can to increase our physical security, but true security is only going to come from banding together with like-minded people and ridding the oppressive forces of violence and hate from our society.

The third thing we have to do is probably the hardest. Like the Israelites leaving Egypt, we have to free our minds from the lies of racism and white supremacy, lies that we have been told for so long that, like the Hebrew slaves, we have started to believe that they are true. These are lies we have been told about ourselves and about others, lies that structure the society in which we live, the water in which we swim. White supremacy is imbedded deeply in this country and in this culture, and if we are going to fight it, we need to actively combat its lies. We need to transform ourselves from a passively and nominally non-racist congregation into an actively and passionately anti-racist community. We have just begun this work at GJC, with the formation this summer of a new committee, aptly named the Cultural Transformation Committee, that is beginning the work of advising us as we embark upon this path. In this coming year we will be having hard conversations in our leadership and engaging consultants and guides to help us change. This kind of transformation is not something that we will complete in a month or a year or even two years. This is a process that will take many years,

and it will not truly be completed until white supremacy is eradicated from this country once and for all. But until that day, we are going to do everything we can to eliminate it from our congregation's culture, to banish it from our hearts, and to rise up against it wherever it rears its ugly head.

This is the day of *harat 'olam*, the day when we are taught a new world was created from nothing. Let us band together today to create a new world both inside and outside our community, inspired by the Edenic vision that it is possible, that it is within our grasp, for all to live together in equality, justice, and peace. *Ken y'hi ratzon* – so may this be God's will.

L'shanah tovah.