

#saytheirnames: A Prayer for Black Lives

On the Sunday of the week that we read parashat Naso,  
my daughter and I kneeled outside her school  
six feet from the other children and families  
chalking Black Lives Matter,  
MLK quotes and rainbow hearts  
in pastel hues on our Philadelphia sidewalks.

Around the corner another family listed the names,  
the names we know,  
of our murdered Black brothers, sisters, trans and non-binary siblings:  
*George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery*  
And this is how I explain to my child  
what it means to declare Black Lives Matter.  
It means that each one of these lives matters.  
*Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant*  
It means that we must say their names, we must speak out.  
*Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile*

In the wilderness, the Holy One,  
The One who breathed the soul into each one of us,  
Instructs Moses to count the people by name.  
*Samuel Dubose, Walter Scott, Michael Brown*  
We count not because God did not know how many there were;  
We count to take on the sacred obligation  
to create a world in which each one of us counts.  
*Rekia Boyd, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling*  
And only in this way, together, can we build our sanctuary in the wilderness,  
can we carry our holy community.

Helicopters circle overhead,  
windows shatter, but we are safe,  
my family, safe in our health,  
our house,  
our tribe of white privilege, remote work, grocery delivery.

But not until each one of us counts  
will we be able to assemble and carry with integrity

the newer words written on parchment, just a few blocks away,  
“We the People of the United States,  
in order to form a more perfect Union...”

As it was written, enslaved people did not count in the People,  
And in the 231 years since, we’ve failed in forming  
A union more perfect.

*Tony McDade, LaQuan McDonald, Terence Crutcher*

This week our Torah tells that each tribe comes to the Mishkan  
bringing identical offerings of silver and gold, rams, goats, and oxen.  
The precious bloody sacrifice repeats again and again,  
each letter inscribed on parchment with care,  
each syllable chanted, every year, everywhere.  
The rabbis say this teaches that each tribe matters,  
every holy offering counts.

But what do we believe as we, again and again,  
hear the same story of sacrifice?

*Manuel Ellis, Eric Harris, Tony Robinson*

Again, a person, a Black person,  
has been shot, smothered, has fallen to the ground.  
We learn the name, we watch the video, we see the mourners,  
we join the protests,  
every year, everywhere.

Is this sacrifice enough yet?

*Alexia Christian, Mya Hall, Shelly Frey*

As it repeats, we resist, we insist  
Black Lives Matter!  
But neither expiation nor perfection is within our grasp.

Some vow to separate,  
Free their hair, drink dissent in place of wine.  
Some are lost, but others become our prophets, our artists, our organizers,  
who lead us back onto a holy path.

Others, afraid, disconnected, lay blame without knowing  
They assume that the jogger is a thief  
That the driver has a gun  
That the child is a threat  
That the woman is unfaithful.

But when those in power force bitterness on those they don't know, those they fear,  
unmediated by priest or ritual or restraint,  
they take life, they break innocence, and the sacrifice repeats again.

*Tanisha Anderson, Miriam Carey, Michelle Cusseaux*

In its wisdom our tradition teaches us the blessing we need this week,  
the blessing that we make upon all of our children, all of Philadelphia, all people in  
our imperfect union.

We must summon our ancestors:

Moses and Aaron; priests with faces covered and arms raised; parents kissing their  
children;

We must summon ourselves;

We must cry out, speaking:

May the Holy One bless you and keep you,

*Meagan Hockaday, Natasha McKenna, Romain Brisbon*

May the Holy One shine upon you and show you grace,

*Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, George Mann, Jerame Reed, Matthew Ajibade*

May the Holy One's face lift toward you and grant you peace.

*Sean Reed, Akai Gurley, Jameek Lowery, Alteria Woods, Jordan Edwards, Dominique  
Clayton, Atatiana Jefferson.*

Ken y'hi ratzon.

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