

Personal Tshuva & Transforming Our Unjust World

Kol Nidre 5781

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*We stand in the midst of the burning world
primed to burn with compassionate love and justice,
To turn inward and find holy fire at its core,
To turn outward and see the world that is all
of one flesh with us...*

- Marge Piercy

Earlier this year, Rabbi Toba Spitzer explained that, “The freedom gained in the Exodus has as its end the creation of a society founded on a web of mutual obligation and care, in which the communal good enhances [each of our] personal well-being[s].” There is a continuous line from Exodus to the state of our nation and our world today, including the places where mutual obligation and care has grown stronger and those where it has broken down,

That line runs through and lifts up the history of social, economic, and political justice movements, and struggles against oppression... The American Revolution... The abolition movement... Trust-busting... The Women’s Movement... The labor movement... The civil rights movement... The antiapartheid movement... The environmental movement... Black Lives Matter.

And so tonight we gather our souls together to affirm the communal good by acknowledging, naming, and seeking to repent and atone for the wrongs we have done.

Tonight we ask one another for forgiveness for the oaths and vows we have not kept.

Tonight we forgive others as we hope to forgive ourselves.

Tonight I want to ask you to think with me about the responsibilities each of us carries for the world that is bigger than us but still within our domain—the natural, social, cultural, legal, political, and financial worlds we are part of. The worlds we expect—and work to make—part of the communal, or common, good.

Perhaps you will think of them, as I do, in the framework of a question Simone Zelitch asked in her dvar a couple of weeks ago: *“What is the connection between personal tshuva and transforming an unjust society?”*

How can we respond through tshuva, tefilah, and tzedakah to the wrongs done in our names, and those done on our behalf, with and without our consent? How do we oppose and overcome structural and systemic sins? How do we transform our unjust world?

In my career, my work has been about transformational change... fundamental shifts in how government works,,, aligning capital with social, economic, and political justice ... and, most recently, making the financial system work **for** progressive causes, not against them.

I think about the world in terms of structures (laws and rules) and systems (practices, norms, and cultures). And so I heard Simone's question as: Is "structural and systemic tshuva" even a thing?

I am struggling with those questions in two ways—with the scale and scope of structural and systemic wrongs; and with the cynicism that I realize has infected me.

We all see the scale and scope of wrongs done in our names and on our behalf when we experience what has happened to our government, our laws, our values and our Constitution, and as we see President Trump subverting and scheming to steal the election in plain sight..

... as we see what is happening still to Black lives and we learn about the recurring failure of our laws and the people hired to enforce them for Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Amaud Arbery, and so many others whose names deserve to be said.

... as we understand the unceasing pain and suffering that has resulted from unprecedented wealth and income inequities that are getting worse, not better,

... as we hear from family and friends in California, Oregon, and Washington who are experiencing climate change in every breath

... as we know from experience and from friends working to protect immigrants that the crisis is so much worse than most of us can understand ...

... as we count more than 205,000 people who have died from COVID-19 and the more than 7 million who have been diagnosed, most because of our President's incompetence, vanity, and malicious disregard for human life,

I am discouraged, worn down, and worried. I suspect we are *all* discouraged, worn down, and worried.

The ideas, strategies, and approaches that worked for me for the last 40 years or more and the organizations and institutions that I have trusted ... no longer seem so effective, or effective enough. Yet still I find it difficult to open myself to new ideas, to let go of what got me here, to really see and accept the richness and importance of a new generation of ideas, strategies, and leaders.

A few months ago—following the murder of George Floyd—our daughter Clara scolded me for my skepticism that the outcry for police system reforms would result in real systemic change.

"Can't you just let yourself imagine it?" she asked me, angrily. "We have to be able to imagine better ways!" What she didn't say but I heard was, Because your old ways didn't get it done!

She is right. I need to open my mind. For her, *and for me*.

Maybe you've heard the story—or a version of it—about a man who prayed daily at the Western Wall from sunup to sundown ...

Each day he'd pull on his tallis, wrap his tefillin, and daven silently from sun-up until midday. He left and returned mid-afternoon to daven until the sun went down.

One day a journalist stopped the man to talk.

"I've seen you praying at the Wall day-in and day-out. What are you praying for?"

"Well, in the morning I pray for peace in the world, for a two-state solution, and for the end of all wars. I go home for lunch and a nap. When I come back, I pray for the end of disease, equal human rights for all, and love among all peoples."

"That's wonderful!" she says. "And you've been doing this for how long?"

"23 years."

"23 years!" she cries. "That's amazing. How do you feel after 23 years?"

"Well," he says, "to tell you the truth I feel like I've been talking to a wall."

I always used to identify with that davener.

I tell you the story now because sometimes I feel like a wall, blocking the way.

When did that happen? How did it happen? How do I learn again to see the truth with brutal honesty but still know that good and right will prevail?

I want to atone for the sins we have done to our world so that I can do something about them. I need to atone for becoming a wall. I need to see and feel the connection between transforming an unjust world and personal tshuva.

I found a connection in an unlikely knot of structural and systemic wrongs.

I have long wrestled with the argument that Slavery Reparations are possible to help us overcome and address the 400-year legacy of America's original sin. But just as quickly I have dismissed them because they seemed to me laden with unsolvable complications.

I wasn't using my imagination. I didn't see how reparations could be national tshuva.

In his 2014 essay, "The Case for Reparations," Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote, "Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely." As important, we would be locked in unsustainable and undefendable injustice until we pay our debt.

He anchors his argument in part on Deuteronomy 15:12-15: When a Hebrew man or woman is freed from slavery, "do not let [them] go empty-handed: Furnish [them] out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the Lord your God has blessed you."

Coates traces the ways that past racial injustices rooted in slavery multiplied economically over generations. He details how ongoing social injustice such as segregation and Jim Crow created a “concentration of disadvantage” that continues to cost Black Americans today. He recounts the ways that White people knowingly chose to perpetuate injustices against Black people, compounding their liabilities for their sins.

He gives estimates of that liability—which range from as little as \$205 billion to as much as \$17 trillion. Recently, another writer arguing for Reparations said the bill due for slavery would be closer to \$35 trillion if Black Americans were compensated using the algorithms the nation used to compensate Japanese Americans for their mistreatment during World War II. That is, if America and Americans would atone for our collective sins.

Those are big numbers. By contrast, at the height of the federal COVID response our government was spending about \$1 trillion per month.

Now..., the case Coates made in *The Atlantic* was not actually for Reparations. He was making the case *for Congressional action on legislation to fund an effort to find a process to discuss Reparations*.

The legislation has been pending, without meaningful congressional action, since 1989, when it was first introduced by the late Representative John Conyers of Detroit. In the current Congress, it got a hearing. One hearing. No further action. How can it be that our national leaders are not yet even ready to consider how we might discuss Reparations?

That is where I started to think—or failed to imagine otherwise—that Reparations is not achievable. How to calculate the costs? Who would pay? How to establish fairness in payments? How to decide who deserves reparations? All Black people? Or only those who prove their lineage back to slavery? Why would the burden of proof be on the victims?

This is how I became a wall, failing to believe that Slavery Reparations must get done because it is not only necessary, it is right. And that there is no other way through.

The case for Slavery Reparations rests in no small part on the accomplishment of Holocaust Reparations, or Restitution. Germany has paid more than \$60 billion since 1952 to victims of the Holocaust and their families.

Holocaust restitution is proof that Slavery Reparations can be done, even if takes 70 years. Or even 400 years.

Yet Stuart Eizenstat, who led the U.S. delegation on Holocaust reparations for Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, **opposes** Slavery Reparations. His reasons are as fragile and racist as they seem rational:

- First: German payments were made by “direct perpetrators... *largely* to those who directly suffered and survived, and, *in some cases, their direct heirs*.”
- Second: “poor record-keeping during the slavery era, which predated America’s founding, makes it extremely difficult to trace ancestry back to a specific slave family.”

He calculates as a reason *against* reparations, that by some counts there could be as many as 37 million Black Americans with claims. Let that reason sink in.

- Black people would be better served by “committing the nation to reducing inequality in income and wealth by making targeted and thoughtful investments to lift up both low-income communities and communities of color...” We have tried that several times. It is necessary but far from sufficient.

Near the end of his essay, Coates acknowledges the practical challenges of Reparations. “Perhaps after a serious discussion and debate,” he concludes, “we may find that the country can never fully repay African Americans. But”—he says—“we stand to discover much about ourselves in such a discussion.”

That starts to sound to me like tshuva. Structural and systemic tshuva.

The money? Two days ago, as if for Yom Kippur, one of the biggest Wall Street banks released research which found that the failure to serve Black people fairly and equally in the United States has cost the economy \$16 trillion over the last 20 years. \$17 trillion and \$35 trillion don’t sound so large anymore when economic racial equity would pay dividends twice—once by supporting Black economic growth and once by generating more than enough new wealth to pay for Reparations.

Coates was, in fact, urging tshuva through reparations, though he never used the word. “What I’m talking about,” he writes, “is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal. ... Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.”

A return to our nation living by the real meaning of its founding values.

“To become the perfect union its founders intended,” Professor Olufemi Taiwo of Georgetown University wrote recently in an op-ed, our nation must go through a truth & reconciliation process and make reparations. “It is the precondition for a different future,” he says.

“A precondition for a different future” is one reason I do tshuva.

Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari from our neighbor Kol Tzedek argues pointedly for Reparations *as tshuva*. He says tshuva for 400 years of injustice from slavery to today must be “a process of reparations and restorative justice. Those who have profited are responsible for the process of repair.”

At Dorshei Derekh, we are focused now by the White Fragility conversations many people are engaged in. That work is a necessary start. It is just a beginning, I know, but I can now see in it a restorative justice connection to Truth & Reconciliation and Reparations, a leap that I could not imagine before.

The broader anti-racism goal we have set for Dorshei requires a systemic effort to transform us. It is deeply personal and communal work that is a precondition to making ourselves, our community, and our world anti-racist

I also see the connection between personal tshuva and transformation of an unjust society in other ways in our community.

On Rosh Hashanah, I was turned by Rabbi Tamara Cohen's call for transformation of the Torah by womanist theologians and Ammud, the Jews of Color Torah Academy. I felt inspired by Rabbi Becca Richman's sermon last week on environmental racism and her commitment to act against it in Philadelphia. My imagination expanded learning with Rachel Davidson yesterday.

Finally, I think I know why I started to become a wall, why I started to resist good ideas and shy from opportunities to make change—internally and externally.

Age. Well, really, time.

The unfinished work of my life and my unaccomplished goals started to run up against the inescapable facts of time. And no amount of imagination could change that.

Those of you who are older than me might be chuckling because you have been there and, perhaps, moved past it. Or maybe you never get past it. Those of you are younger may be laughing because you think it is about time people like me get out of your way—at least that is what I was thinking when I was your age.

But with a different perspective I can imagine that I must learn to start new things even though I may not be able to move them forward or live to see them through ... to see that the wall that frightened me can also be a support when I need help, a shelter when I need safety, and a resting place when I need recovery.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that, "In a free society, only some are guilty, but all are responsible." I guess age is no excuse.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.