

George Floyd
June 5, 2020

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch discusses George Floyd's death and our country's yearning for justice.

I am alone in the sanctuary.

I am alone because this cruel virus has separated us, causing us to shelter at home for three months.

But a rabbi's place is not at home. It's on the pulpit — and I want to reclaim this pulpit for myself and for you.

I do not feel alone. I feel that you are with me. I feel your loneliness, your sadness, your concern for yourself and your loved ones. I feel your anxiety, your apprehension for the welfare of our country and our city. Neither are recognizable to us. I share your sense of powerlessness, helplessness and impotence. That we are not in the saddle riding events, but rather events are riding us. I feel your exasperation. I feel your righteous indignation.

I feel your pain: it is beyond anger; it is deep unrequited sadness for politically incompetent and morally deficient national leadership. It is all coming home to roost — the polarization, the incitement, the nastiness, the steady destabilization of the bastions of liberty, the assault on the guardrails of democracy. For the first time in our lives, we worry about America itself. How cruel. How absurd. How sad that during this once-in-a-century cataclysm we are saddled with this government, so unequal to the challenges of the day.

What you are feeling is a form of bereavement. You are in mourning. You are mourning the loss of the lives we used to have a mere three months ago. You are grieving for our convulsing city that we love so much. You cry for the beloved country. Loss paralyzes, immobilizes. It makes us feel vulnerable, yearning for an embrace, human warmth, comradery, understanding, compassion, sympathy, empathy. And yet we are unable to receive these. There is no *shiva* — no gathering — just more of the same isolation as we glue ourselves obsessively to screens showing chaos, destruction, anger and despair.

It turns out that the president's inaugural address in January 2017, when he spoke of American carnage, was not descriptive — it was predictive. Now we see clearly. This is what real American carnage looks like under his watch: Forty million Americans unemployed. Mass hunger. Food lines miles long. Chaotic incompetence. Over 100,000 Americans dead within four months. A country seething with anger, division and despair. A nation disrespected — even pitied, its moral authority— built up over decades — squandered by fakery, puffery and distraction. Its moral center eviscerated by those who are in over their heads and know it.

Oy lanu ki fana hayom — Jeremiah despaired: “Woe unto us, for the day is setting and the shadows of the night grow long.” They act falsely, they offer fake healing for the wounds of My

people, saying ‘all is well, all is well’ – when nothing is well.” “Peace, peace [they cry] when there is no peace.”

This is how a civilization declines — from the inside, not the outside. Resilience corrodes. Resistance to biological and political pathogens weakens. The body politic is inflamed, overwhelmed, unable to marshal life-giving antibodies to fight off moral disease.

We can’t breathe. The irony is that George Floyd contracted the coronavirus. But he avoided the ICU. He avoided the ventilator. He didn’t have pneumonia. He recovered. Racism suffocated him. He was asphyxiated by cruelty, callousness and contempt.

Have you reflected on what kind of person can ram his knee on another’s neck for close to nine minutes as life drains from the victim’s body? Have you asked yourself who is capable of doing something like that? What depravity resides in the soul of such a person? Who raised this man from childhood? What values did they instill in him? Who befriended him? Who trained him? Who authorized him to police the streets?

Have you reflected on the other police officers milling about, witnessing the entire nine-minute murder? What kind of people can casually and callously watch the air of life sucked from a man pleading for mercy while bystanders shout, “He can’t breathe!” Have you asked yourselves what depravity resides in the souls of such people? Who raised these men from childhood? What values did they instill in them? Who befriended them? Who trained them? Who authorized them to police the streets?

Their degeneracy is yet more evidence that the murder of George Floyd was not an isolated event: one police officer and one African-American victim. Their insolent indifference testifies to systemic and systematic racism, America’s original sin. It was not law enforcement. It was the unlawful enforcement of a supremacist mindset, which disregards the God-given moral worth of every human being.

With all this American carnage strewn around us, take heart. We are still able to clear the moral rot and reverse the moral decay. It is not too late. The explosion of righteous anger across the length and breadth of the country – of the world – is evidence that we are not alone and the protesters are not alone. See how many Americans and good people worldwide stand with us, embrace us, comfort us and strengthen us. We are not powerless. Together we constitute an irresistible force: the hosts of an indomitable moral army that will prevail in the end. Keep the faith. “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Let there be no confusion: We utterly condemn the violence, mayhem and destruction falsely perpetrated in the name of George Floyd. We abhor anarchy. These are crimes, not legitimate expressions of dissent. While recognizing the complexities and difficulties, state and local officials are obligated to prevent violence, looting and rioting on the streets of our cities. Government’s first responsibility is the protection of life and property.

We have noticed that within these forces of destruction are those who defaced Jewish institutions and targeted Jewish-owned businesses. And we have heard, in the midst of all this injustice, that some have found ways to blame Israel and the Jews. We are disappointed, but not surprised, and we condemn these contemptible people in the strongest possible way.

But we will not be distracted. As George Floyd's brother reminded us this week: the mayhem perpetrated by this violent minority, dishonors the memory of Mr. Floyd, diverting attention from the urgency of healing, justice and social repair. Overwhelmingly, most of the protesters are peaceful.

And they are right. They are not alone. We stand with them. So many of them are young – and of all colors, ethnicities and backgrounds. It gives us hope for the future. I love this generation of young Americans. I admire their refusal to tolerate injustice and discrimination in any form. In many ways, they are much better than we were at their age.

Those of us who are white do not really know what it's like to be Black in America. It is in the nature of human life: we internalize that which is internal to us. We should open our eyes and see more. We should open our ears and hear more.

Alongside all of the noble ideals and enlightened qualities of America, there is still a festering, stinking and unhealed pustule of racism. Open your eyes and see: So many Black Americans worry every time they leave their homes; when their teenage and 20-something children are out on the town, when they walk into bodegas or stores, when they jog in the neighborhood. Imagine if you lived that way.

The beginning of morality is the ability to put yourself in another's shoes. Listen to our fellow Americans and try to understand. Their experience with law enforcement is not our experience. Even something as innocent as bird watching in Central Park can be fraught with racial tension and potentially life-altering — if not life-threatening — consequences. Open your eyes to the disproportionate deaths from COVID-19 in communities of color. Give heed to the poverty, under-employment and unemployment, unequal access to health insurance, housing, educational and economic opportunity in minority communities.

As long as America postpones justice we will heave with discontent. We can never be what we ought to be without single-minded devotion to developing some kind of vaccine to racism. This virus has infected our country for 400 years, and is embedded in its soil and soul. We will never breathe free without a cure.

Jews cannot be silent in this struggle. We have a platform. We have resources. We have capabilities. We must use them. We have a history of discrimination, hatred and persecution that allows us to see what others may not — to feel what others do not.

The Black community cannot resolve this issue by itself. Nor should it. It is not simply a Black problem. It is an American problem. "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison," the Sages

teach. Others must turn the key and unlock the door. Who knows this better than the Jews? We have been abandoned so many times along the way. Our history is filled with chapters describing our yearning to be heard, to be helped, to be saved — for someone to unlock the doors of our prison.

We are not allowed to be indifferent. Jews are commanded: “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.”

Of all the moral sins, the sin of indifference is among the most egregious: “If there is a needy person...in any of the villages in your land, do not harden your heart,” states the Torah. “And shut your hand against your needy kinsmen. Rather, open your hand and give him whatever he needs.”

It is easier to turn away, especially in these harsh times. We have our own problems. We, ourselves, may be out of work or underemployed. We have been at home for three months trying to dodge this pandemic. Many of us have lost loved ones or know people who have. Many, many of us have been ill ourselves.

But the moment indifference overtakes empathy we become morally diminished. Silence makes us accomplices. One overriding Jewish principle handed down to us from the very mists of antiquity is: do not remain neutral. Neutrality is the refuge of cowards. To be neutral, to stay out of the fight — indifference — never helps the good people. It is precisely what the bad people count on: indifference to injustice, indifference to hatred, indifference to racism. Progress requires stepping into the fray. Isaiah demands, repair the breach. Do not simply observe the rupture or mind the gap or step into the breach— Repair the breach! Restore the path of righteousness.

And remember — and I say this especially to young Americans — there can be no progress without struggle. Frederick Douglass warned: “Those who are for freedom and yet deprecate struggle are like those who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and never will.”

What can you do? Act. Protest. Join with others. Bear witness. Speak. Contribute time and money. Vote! Vote! Vote in November!

And tell the truth about racial injustice. Don't lie to yourselves.

Be'chessed ve'emt yichuppar avon. “Through mercy and truth,” the Bible states, “is iniquity washed away.”

Had the president actually opened that Bible at the church this week, he would have read that God does not command dominating others, demeaning them, debasing them, disparaging them, diminishing them, dishonoring them, disrespecting them, disgracing them, defaming them. Rather the president might have stumbled upon this verse from the Book of Leviticus:

Ani Adonai Eloheichem asher hotzeiti etchem me'erezt metzrayim... va'eshbor motot ulchem, va'olich etchem komemiyut. "I, the Eternal, am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians... I broke the bars of your yoke and allowed you to walk upright."

The Hebrew word, "*komemiyut*," means, "arise," "stand up" — "walk proudly." It implies that there was previous degradation, but you have arisen, you have overcome — and you are now able to stand tall.

It's a beautiful image. Imagine it: try to picture it in your mind. Break the yoke that is placed upon the neck of the slave, the oppressed, the disadvantaged, the scorned, the one who is weighed down and bent over — lift that yoke and you have released him from his burdens so that he can stand upright.

Thus we learn that Judaism requires us that we lift people up: to bring them *komemiyut* — to raise them from degradation and to allow them to walk upright — and to breathe. A person who is bent over cannot fill his lungs with enough air. Only by standing tall can we inhale the pure air of freedom, dignity, liberty and equality.

I leave you with these words by Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

"To sin by silence when we should protest,
Makes cowards of men.
The human race has climbed on protest.
Had no voice been raised against injustice, ignorance and lust,
The inquisition yet would serve the law,
And guillotines decide our least disputes.
The few who dare must speak and speak again
To right the wrongs of many..."