

D'var Torah, Shabbat Beha'alotecha, June 13, 2020

Ad Matai- "until when"

The "whole of the Torah," the core of Judaism, was summed up by the sage Hillel *not* as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" but as "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." That phrase is called by some the ethic of reciprocity. The back story is a prospective convert asked that the Torah be explained to him while he stood on one foot. While Hillel's counterpart, Shammai, dismissed the man, Hillel accepted the question, converted him on the spot, and said: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn." (BT Shabbat31a) Hillel's statement simultaneously empowers *and* puts responsibility on each of us. It demands that we think before we speak or act. It reflects the understanding in Judaism that every person is created in the image of God and must be treated as such. What it demands of us today, is to raise up and preserve that foundational Jewish concept. Humankind needs to be reminded of it time and again. And most certainly, right now.

Most of us had not heard the predictions of a world-wide pandemic like Coronavirus. Suddenly, and with great alacrity, in early March, we were faced with fear, uncertainty, confusion and reasonable concern for our own and each other's health.

Now, with the murder of George Floyd, during a time of masks worn to protect each other in the face of the Coronavirus, the fault lines of race on which this nation teeters have been *unmasked*. Our hearts are broken as we witness with horror two pandemics colliding in our society: the plague of racism and the pandemic of the invisible Coronavirus. Steven Colbert, having been away when George Floyd was murdered, commented, he never thought he would be away for a few days and when he returned Corona virus would be 'below the fold.' But here we are. The reality of racism has been unmasked and we must respond. We know from Jewish tradition and history that silence is *never* an option. *Ad matai*, I ask. *Until when* will we live with the brutal pandemic of racism?

Rav Claudia Kreiman, recalls her experience, last week, at an interfaith, inter-racial clergy march. "We stood silently for eight minutes and forty-six seconds.... We prayed and cried. I was hot, my feet began to hurt, I couldn't focus. In that long eight minutes and forty-six seconds

I had time to become uncomfortable, I had time for my mind to wander, time to glance at my phone and ultimately time to let go and be in this moment of prayer and silence. And I cried. It was such a long time to stand, and it was a long time to think. And it was a very long time that Derek Chauvin held his knee on George Floyd's neck; long enough to reflect, long enough to reconsider, long enough to hear the voices around him pleading for George Floyd's life - long enough to make a choice and simply move his knee.”¹

God breathed God's sacred breath into every human being upon her emergence into this world. We read in Genesis 2:7: וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו, נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה - *And God breathed* into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. “It is the ultimate denial of God and humanity to squeeze the breath of life out of one of God's children, each one created in God's image.”²

With the murder of George Floyd my discomfort with the ramifications of Coronavirus, changed in two ways: First, its position as the quintessential horror to fall on humankind, was usurped. Second, what has replaced it is my recognition that we must, as a worldwide community, eliminate entirely, systemic racism, in all its forms. We call these extraordinary times. They are. But they are not. Corona virus has been with us for several months and could hang on for many more and even recur. Most of us have learned new habits that should keep us relatively safe. Can we still call the virus's upheaval of life as we have known it, extraordinary? And as for institutional racism, it has been on-going since before this country was founded. I don't know anybody who would call it extraordinary. Far more appropriate would be absolutely unacceptable. But having said that, *and really* meaning it, what can we do?

Judaism is a faith for those who seek to change the world. Torah teaches us not to be bystanders. To stand up and participate; to march in protest against the world that *is*, with the goal of creating, together, a world as *it ought to be*. We are to remember and take care of the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. To be a Jew is to use our short time on earth to

¹ Shabbat N'kalah, Shabbat Naso

² From MBR message on George Floyd's death and racism in this country

make a difference, to change lives for the better and to strive consistently to heal some of the scars in our fractured world. But how?

First, we cannot heal the wounds of racism in our country without simultaneously working to heal the virus of racism within ourselves and our communities.

The prophets did not *predict* a better, more ethical world. They *demand*ed that *we all work, together toward it!* We cannot be witness to the killing of innocent, black people and simply turn away.

Second, please listen to the words of the prophet Micah. The people had turned away from God. Apparently, they had forgotten all God had done for them during their trek out of Egypt and through the wilderness. They respond to the prophet who has expressed God's despair and anger by asking: "with what shall [we] approach the Lord, do homage to God on high?" Should they bring burnt offerings, they ask? God's favorite-unblemished calves a year old? Their own first born sons? ***And how does the prophet respond:*** "God has told you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: *ONLY* to do justice, to love goodness and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Forget about your offerings. God doesn't want your prayers three times a day. God is not interested in your rituals *unless* they are followed by acts of justice, compassion and loving kindness. In the words of Reverend Al Sharpton- we are responsible for making sure no other black man will say to a white cop: "get your knee off my neck"?

The answer to the question of "how" we can affect change, may not be so much about "doing" as it is about "being"; about how we walk through the world.

We can listen, demanding of ourselves that we are willing to have our minds changed.

We can have hope; the kind that involves trust and love and can overcome fear. Shawn Dromgoole is a 29-year-old black man. He has lived in the same Nashville neighborhood his entire life. He admits that since he was a child, he felt an unease in his hometown, acutely aware that few people looked like him. When he read about Ahmaud Arbery and then George Floyd, he thought, "What happened to these men could easily happen to me." Consumed with fear, Dromgoole turned to Facebook and posted the following message: "Yesterday, I wanted to

walk around my neighborhood but the fear of not returning home to my family alive, kept me on my front porch.”

Responses from his community poured in. “Neighbor, after neighbor reached out, telling me they wanted to walk with me,” he said. People who had not previously known each other, made it a habit to walk regularly, together, feeling safe. Dromgoole spoke of finally feeling seen; like he was part of something...“because when you walk with your neighbors — and you know they really *see* you — the world becomes a better place,” he said.³

We must hold hope relentlessly. Because, hopelessness is the enemy of justice.⁴ So said Bryan Stevenson, the black, Harvard educated lawyer who founded the Equality Justice Institute in Montgomery, Alabama in 1989. And hope reminds us that even what is unfortunately, still predictable, is *not* inevitable.

Finally, we can hearken and remember the words of Rabbi Tarfon, *Pirke Avot 2:21*: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to desist from it."

Ad matai/until when... will racism plague humankind? God is waiting for our answer. May it be that each of us will find our own ways to heal the wounds of racism within ourselves and our communities. By living the values of Torah, we can make God manifest in our world. Then, each person, with the power within of her own unique spark of the Divine, can answer the question *Ad matai-* until when will the plague of racism be with us, by saying *ad kan/until here;* until now!

Amen,

Together, may we make it so.

Please turn to page 428 and rise, as you are able, for Chatzi Kaddish

³ Kind world, WBUR

⁴ Just Mercy, the movie