

Collective Responsibility
Yom Kippur 5781
Rabbi D'ror Chankin-Gould

I was 15. I was away for the weekend at Camp Ramah in Ojai, California on a Shabbat retreat for Hebrew High School. I arrived in my bunk, unloaded my clothes, and the counselor invited the boys to gather outside for ice breakers. We sat in a circle of logs staring at our shoes, and started telling jokes. The jokes were 15-year-old boy jokes: stupid potty humor. As people got comfortable, the jokes got dirty. And then, the jokes got racist. I remember someone using the n word, and a punch line about people swinging from trees. I blanched. I trembled in shock and anger. And, I said nothing.

Later, I found the one staff person who was herself a person of color and told her the story. I told her I was appalled by what those boys did. She thanked me for sharing and then, she looked me in the eyes and asked, “How did *you* respond?”

I may not have told the joke. I may not have liked it. I may not have laughed. But I *didn't* respond. My silence enabled their racism.

That lesson has always stuck with me: Just because I am not the perpetrator does not mean that I am innocent. My responsibility extends beyond the things I do or say, and includes the things I do *not* do, and do *not* say. If I participate in community and ignore its faults and injustices, *I* am responsible.

The prayers of Yom Kippur hammer this point home. Today you are asked to confess sins you didn't commit. In the Al Cheyt, in the Ashamnu, and in the Vidui, we confess in the collective for the things that *we*, that all of us have done.

We have sinned against you by taking bribes

על חטא שקטאנו לפגיה

We have sinned against you by resorting to violence

על חטא שקטאנו לפגיה

We have sinned against you through baseless hatred

על חטא שקטאנו לפגיה

Even if I have not taken a bribe, I beat my chest. Even if I have not resorted to violence, I beat my chest. Even I have not been hateful, I beat my chest.

Why?

Because my community *has* taken bribes. My community *has* done violence. My community *has* been hateful.

And I am responsible for my community. I am responsible for the times I looked away. I am responsible for my silence. I am responsible.

This afternoon, we will read from the book of Jonah. It's an amazing story.

As a kid in synagogue I always looked forward to the Jr. Congregation version of the Jonah story because they took out the felt boards. High tech! And the best part was that after Jonah ran from God, and was swallowed by the whale, there was an amazing felt piece of vomit for when Jonah was spit up onto the land! What little boy doesn't love a grotesque felt board?

Though not as exciting to children, the truth is that the essence of the story, is what happened next. Jonah's whole mission was to go to Nineveh, a community not his own, to tell *them* to repent.

And in fact, Jonah shows up in Nineveh, and speaks only *five* simple words, “עוד ארבעים יום ונינה יהיה פרוץ” (Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown”) and *snap*, the people *believe* him: they put on sack cloth and ashes, pray to God for forgiveness, and change their ways.

Jonah was swallowed by the whale, because he was running away from his responsibility for *others*. He did not create the sins of Nineveh: he didn't even live there! It wasn't his *fault* that they behaved so terribly.

But it *was* his fault that he chose to be silent. It *was* his fault that he stepped *back* instead of stepping up. It *was* his fault that in his fear of being “uncomfortable,” he witnessed injustice and said nothing. Jonah was responsible even for the sins that were not his own.

Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, “...indifference to evil is worse than evil itself...in a free society, some are guilty, but *all* are responsible.” We are all responsible.

As a man, I have been in many rooms where the voices of women are ignored or belittled. I may not have created that dynamic, but, as a witness, I am responsible.

As a white person, I have been in stores where *I* am offered kind assistance but Black customers are followed around the store with suspicion and disrespect. I may not have created that dynamic, but as a witness, I am responsible.

Yom Kippur is the day when we hold *ourselves* responsible.

In our lives, what are *we* responsible for? In which ways has *our* community: our city, our state, or our country failed to fulfill promises of equity and justice?

We didn't create the histories. We didn't create the institutions. We didn't create the disparities. But nevertheless, we are responsible.

Rabbi Susan Talve in St. Louis, wrote a poignant confessional for this Yom Kippur, aiding us in holding ourselves accountable. Some of her words include:

“Long ago the Prophet Micah told us to hurl our sins into the sea.

And now, we are sinking into this sea of sins that threatens our lives as we struggle to breathe.

Sins of pollutant by-products of greed that assault our planet—making toxic her air, earth and water.

Sins of systems of white supremacy built in so deeply they bruise our very souls...

Sinking into the sea overflowing with these sins of systemic violences that are the legacy of the sin of slavery

For these sins *slach lanu*,

God forgive us if we do not turn this moment into a movement for change.

Machal lanu

Pardon our past failure to do and be better.

Caper lanu

Lead us as we dare to be courageous and bold enough today to redeem the future of our planet and humanity with fewer sins hurled into the sea.

Because our seas are suffering and full ...and with our family at the Tree of Life, at Mother Emmanuel and Christchurch—with Breonna and Ahmaud, and with George and countless others who were swallowed by these sin- filled- seas

I, too, am sinking and *for all the days of your life*
I can't breathe.”

As Rabbi Talve so powerfully shares, our seas are teeming with injustice.

I, like so many of you, come to this Yom Kippur with a heavy heart. As a Chicagoan, as an American, as a human being, but also as a father.

I am the father of a black son and a biracial son, and I am not ok. I fear for my sons. I fear for their lives. I want, like every other parent, to protect them. But I know that a day will come, when they will stand without me, without their white father by their side, and I know that they will be in danger.

God knows, as I lay awake at night trembling in fear for their bodies and their lives, I did not create the prejudices, hatreds, or systems of racism that terrify me, and will terrorize them. But I am responsible.

I am responsible because I am their father. I am responsible because this is my community. I am responsible because this is my city. I am responsible because this is my country. I am a free citizen, which means I may not be guilty, but I am responsible.

I am responsible because I am a Jew, a son of Jonah, and I know that *my* words, like his, could be the ones to change history.

I am responsible because I am a Jew, and I have been taught by generations of ancestors, to say *Al Cheyt*, not only for what I've done, but also for what *we've* done. I have what to beat my chest about. Because the truth is, I *haven't* done enough.

It's so uncomfortable to think about our responsibility. It makes us squirm a bit, it makes our chests tight and our shoulders tense. And that's ok, because on Yom Kippur, we're supposed to feel uncomfortable.

But that discomfort isn't meant to just sit, it's supposed to go somewhere. Our radical honesty, complete responsibility, and audacious discomfort, should lead us to action.

I don't know about you, but here's where I often feel stuck. I am just one person. I am so small. What could I possibly do that would make a difference?

Here, I checked in with one of Anshe Emet's congregants and leaders of our new racial justice task force, Koleinu, Tani Prell, and together we brainstormed some ideas. Because no matter how small we feel, we all *can* make a difference.

One powerful possibility, is to cede some of your air time, some of your power, and to instead amplify someone else's voice. In a room where folks aren't being heard, step up and hand them the mic. Anshe Emet member Suzanne Muchin did just this. Suzanne was part of a national initiative called "#ShareTheMicNow" led in Chicago by Watchen Nunyen, where Suzanne and other white women in leadership positions were asked to hand the reins over to women of color for a period of time. For example, as founder of "the Big Payoff Radio", Suzanne turned the mic over to a black female colleague named Kara Wright, amplifying a voice that might not have reached the same audience. And Suzanne didn't drive the conversation, she listened. We have the power to ensure that those who are silenced are heard loud and clear.

Another way to take responsibility, is to educate ourselves. Koleinu, the name of Anshe Emet's racial justice task force, means "our voices." And when the voices of people of color are speaking, white folks need to hear them. Educating ourselves about the words, behaviors, and experiences that are invisible to us is a life-long process. Unlearning what we've been taught and re-learning new perspectives takes time: we never graduate. Tani Prell led an incredible anti-racism training session for our synagogue community this year, and more are to come: educating ourselves is a first step in shifting the tides.

Each of us also has the power to be an interrupter. When we witness micro-aggressions in the grocery store, at our dinner tables, or in our offices, we can *choose* to interrupt. The onus for educating others about racism doesn't fall on people of color alone, white people need to step *up* and *interrupt*. Earlier this year, a white AES member, Fran Abramson, was standing by a basketball court with her granddaughter watching young black men play while talking to me on the phone. A young white woman approached her and interrupted: she was fearful that Fran was on the phone with the police, and wanted to make sure that these young men weren't going to be harassed. Fran responded with graciousness and gratitude. She let the young men know she was

just talking to a friend so that they wouldn't be anxious. Fran and I both received it as a learning moment. That young woman was such a simple and powerful interrupter: she saw a potential aggression, and took it upon herself to intervene.

We also must *show up* when we are asked. Rabbi Siegel has built relationships between Anshe Emet and Bright Star Church, for years and years. Because of that sacred trust, Pastor Harris knows that he can count on Rabbi Siegel. Relationships matter, and they are not built overnight. We are not allies by dictating to folks in the Black community what *we* are going to do to help them, but rather by following *their* lead. When Pastor Harris began to organize for racial justice in the face of police brutality, no small task in the midst of a pandemic, he asked Rabbi Siegel to show up. Rabbi Siegel wore his mask, and kept a safe distance, but show up he did. Some in our community watched on livestream, others marched, others joined the car caravan, each making their own health and safety choices. But Rabbi Siegel was there, and our community was there. Were the risks complicated? Of course. But if we claim our responsibility for the injustices we may not have created, but we have enabled, we *must* show up.

Finally, we can intervene in the injustice of our society by giving of our time and of our treasure. Give enough that it hurts a bit. There is no lack of organizations, local and national, fighting to address systemic racism and embedded disparities. If you're looking for somewhere to start, consider the TURN center, also known as the Urban Resilience Network, a trauma response initiative led by Pastor Harris and deeply influenced by the relationship which Rabbi Siegel fostered with NATAL in Israel.

When I was 15, I thought it was *enough* to report racist jokes. I thought it was *enough* not to tell them. I thought it was *enough* to feel internally repulsed.

It wasn't enough.

for all the days of your life

This Yom Kippur, let us allow ourselves to feel uncomfortable:

על חטא שִׁחֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ

We have sinned before you by looking the other way in the face of racism

על חטא שִׁחֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ

We have sinned before you by keeping silent

על חטא שִׁחֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ

We have sinned before you by blaming others rather than taking responsibility

God, on this Yom Kippur, help us to remember that we are the children of Jonah. We feel so powerless, so small, and so insignificant, but, God, remind us, that one voice can change the tide. May we find Jonah's voice and his courage within us. May we take responsibility.

May we honor those whose lives were lost because of *our* indifference. They were beautiful and sacred and kind... and we failed them.

And God, may we be better. May we change. May we come to next Yom Kippur standing tall, because of how *responsible* we became. And, having done so, may we be worthy of Your forgiveness.

Amen.



ANSHE EMET
SYNAGOGUE
for all the days of your life