

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon
Delivered by Eli Kramer
September 14th, 2015
Shir Tikvah

Shanah Tovah. Thank you for this honor and this opportunity.

As we enter these blessed days of awe, I start with a wish for our communities, courtesy of lyrics from one of my favorite bands, *Counting Crows*:

“Maybe this year will be better than the last.”

More than once since last Yom Kippur, I’ve looked out at our world, and felt the depths of despair. Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland. Black and brown faces caught up in a storm of inequitable treatment at the hands of police and in the face of our justice system.

And more than once since last Yom Kippur, I’ve thought about my role in all of this.

What’s a Jew to do?

And then I’ve thought of the famous poem by Pastor Martin Niemöller who was a German theologian who spoke out about the non-response of the great majority of German intellectuals to the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany, with his poem, *First They Came*:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

“Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

“Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

“Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

“Father?” said Isaac.

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

The Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac. A moment in Torah time that is frozen for us to remember and imagine, to dissect and interpret.

I remember as a young boy learning about the Akedat Yitzchak primarily from the perspective of Abraham.

The oversimplified interpretation as I recall it goes as follows: God was testing Abraham to see whether Abraham was God-fearing.

Abraham, in showing willingness to sacrifice his own son because of God's command, passed this test with flying colors. God speaks out and saves Abraham from doing the deed, and,

Thus, this becomes a story of humility in the presence of God. Of the connection between fear of God and love of God, and of a powerful, but merciful God.

But, what about Isaac's perspective?

Bound. Tied. Looking up from the altar at the violent raised-hand of his father looking down on him—Abraham powerful, deceptive, and oppressive.

If we step back and think about the Akedat Yitzhak from Isaac's perspective, we can start to see a picture of Abraham the oppressor, and Isaac the oppressed.

There, at that moment on Mt. Moriah, our forefather, the Jew, is the oppressor, and our other forefather, the Jew, is the oppressed. All at the same time.

What does that moment teach us about ourselves as Jews in America in 2015?

The year now closing, 5775, was a tough year in America.

It was ushered in last August 9th with the murder of Michael Brown, bound on the altar of West Florissant Avenue in Ferguson, MO, killed by a police officer, Darren Wilson, who saw in him a "demon", killed him, and then left him to lay there lifeless for four and a half hours before an ambulance came.

The year continued on to a non-indictment of police officers after the strangling of Eric Garner, whose breath was squeezed out of his body on the altar of a sidewalk in Staten Island. Mr. Garner's crime was selling loose cigarettes while black. His final words caught on video were, "I can't breathe." Repeated eleven times.

The year continued on to Cleveland, OH, where Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old kid, in an interaction with police that lasted less than 2 seconds, Tamir Rice, was shot dead on the altar of a playground in the light snow.

Tamir Rice died in his own blackness, in the heart of his childhood.

5775 was a year in which far too many Black people in America were bound on an altar like Isaac, but unlike Isaac, too many of their fates were not spared. These three boys, men, and far too many others died in violence. Their deaths were undignified. Their deaths were riddled with layers of an oppressive world.

And what if, as they were bound and tied, we looked up from the altar through their eyes. What or who was standing above them, arms raised ready to kill? Who is their Abraham?

From what I can gather by looking around in my own life, I was born into and given most every privilege that this world has to offer. And you may be asking yourself...

Why is a kid, all right, a grown kid, who has had every privilege life in America has to offer—college-educated parents, ample means, recipient of an amazing education at every stage of life—and also who is privileged by basically every system of inequity in America—I am male in a patriarchal world. I am straight in a homophobic world. I am considered white in a world that fears blackness.

Why am I spending the first time I've ever spoken from the Beemah since I became a Bar Mitzvah on Mt. Masada in 1992 on the issues of systemic racism and oppression in America.

Because, I am Jewish.

To be Jewish means to be in a permanent minority.

To be Jewish means to remember our own history of oppression and enslavement that our ancestors suffered.

And to be Jewish means to look at a broken world and think *Tikkun Olam*.

Rabbi Hillel once famously said, "That which is hateful to you, do not unto another. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary—go study."

Well, Rabbi, I've spent the better part of the last year studying. And what I've learned during that time I believe will change me forever.

Don't get me wrong, 5775 wasn't the first year America became inequitable along racial lines, and it also wasn't the first time I bore witness to systemic inequity and systemic racism in America. But still I was blind.

I started to awaken to systemic inequity in our country when I started teaching in the Bronx in 2003. I worked in a public school in the South Bronx that no child should ever have to attend. It was heart breaking to see children who had such immense and infinite potential bottled up in a world and in a school that expected nothing good of them.

Their skin was brown. They were Black and Latino. But still I was blind.

I caught my 6th grade students in their 12th year of life and so many of them were so jaded already by what our America saw in them. But still I was blind.

And Minneapolis, I learned later, unfortunately isn't different enough, and in many ways is exactly the same as the Bronx. In our schools in our state and city right now—where the schools are filled with primarily beautiful black and brown faces, the quality of educational opportunity sags to an unconscionably weak level. But still I was blind.

And where our schools are predominantly white, the quality of education in schools has helped MN yield the top average ACT score in the country for many years running. But still I was blind.

Thus, instead of being the great equalizer that public education is supposed to be in our great American Experiment, instead it has become the great perpetuator of all the inequity that already exists in our imperfect world. But still I was blind.

When I started to study after the binding of Michael Brown, and the binding of Eric Garner, and the binding of Tamir Rice, I started to open my eyes to a shockingly similar pattern play out in response to each of their deaths.

First, there is the character assassination of the victim that plays out in the echo chambers of public opinion, the press, and social media.

Then, there are the video recordings that tell our observant eyes certain things, and there are people—often talking heads or politicians—that tell us opposite things.

Then there is the white prosecutor. I've now learned that 95% of prosecutors in America are white. And the prototype prosecutor either brings no charges against the police, or eventually brings a non-indictment.

I had been blind to how systemic and systematic this cycle of violence against black and brown bodies has become.

And we all know it was not just these three victims. Related versions of this tragic story played out for John Crawford, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Rekia Boyd, Trayvon Martin, and so many others.

If the face of all of this, what is a Jew to do?

One of the best parts of being Jewish is that, collectively, we have very good memories.

For example, we remember that Sandy Koufax didn't pitch in a World Series game because it fell on Yom Kippur, 50 years ago in 1965. What a mensch.

We also remember Bubbie's favorite soy sauce and orange juice chicken wing recipe even though she hasn't made it in 25 years. It was that good.

And, on a more somber note, we remember our collective history.

Each year on Passover we remember when we were in Egypt's land, enslaved and oppressed at the hands of Pharaoh, Moses singing *Let My People Go*.

Each year on Yom HaShoah, we remember the unspeakable crime committed against us in the Holocaust just 70 years ago.

We remember that we were enslaved. We remember what it means to be oppressed. We know what it means to be bound. We know what it means to be Isaac.

I thought knowing what it means to be oppressed, and generally having empathy for people as a result, got me a free pass into the perpetual do-goodnik club.

I thought showing up to teach black and brown children in a middle school classroom in the Bronx out of the goodness of my heart was enough.

I thought voting for Wellstone and Obama was expression enough of my belief in the dignity and value of all people.

And then, over the course of the last year, I started to think about what Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice saw from their eyes as they looked up, bound on the altar, and I realized the person standing over them was me.

I am Isaac, yes. But I am also Abraham. All at the same time.

See in America, Jews, as a general rule, we have become white.

Whiteness, as we all know, is a social construct in America. And whereas throughout our long history as Jews, we've always been treated as more black than white because we were Jewish. We've been hated. We've been targeted. We've been systematically and repeatedly knocked down by state violence. We've been victims of genocide.

But in America today, things are different. In America today, by and large we pray freely, go where we please, seek and obtain employment, are free from systematic state violence and oppression, and we have the opportunity to live out our full humanity.

Can we say the same for our brothers and sisters who are black and brown? Is today's America *for them* just like it is *for us*?

As a group of people whom, by and large, the world views as white in America, what is our role in the perpetuation of systemic racism and state violence against people of color in our country?

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, have we perpetuated forms of institutionalized racism and white supremacy so embedded into the fabric of our country that black people counted as 3/5ths of a person in our country's Constitution, and were not given the right to vote until 1965, exactly two months to the day before Koufax did the bench-sitting heard round the Jewish world?

Yes, for Black people in America, the sacred right to vote is only 50 years old.

Who among us has had a different reaction—conscious or not—to different people because of the color of their skin?

I'm beyond sad to say I have, and it's really hard for me to talk about. It's supposed to be hard to talk about this.

Systems of oppression have always discouraged the oppressors from talking about the ways in which oppression manifests itself.

I've come to terms with the fact that at a very fundamental level, I'm racist. I think in some ways we all are.

Not like Donald Trump racist—let's not completely blow this out of proportion—but like I have implicit biases. I have both conscious and unconscious attitudes that sort and differentiate people according to the color of their skin.

That's what we've been taught to do in America.

I'm racist. And I'm coming to terms with it.

And I am coming to terms with the fact that in a world and a country that values whiteness, and as a person the world sees as white, by definition I am part of the problem.

But I'm also starting to make sense of the fact that it's not all my fault.

It's not my fault that I was born into a world that sees me as white, and fears blackness.

It's not all my fault that I was born into a country that enslaved its own people for hundreds of years before fighting a bloody war over whether enslaving its own people was a reasonable thing to do. All only 150 years ago.

But, what I've also started to realize is that what *is up to me* is whether I do something to combat our legacy of institutionalized racism in America.

I can either take institutionalized racism as a given in this country, and go along for the ride, or I can fight against it.

Beverly Tatum, the author of "Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria?", talks about a helpful model for thinking about our roles in a world with institutionalized racism.

She calls it a moving walkway of racism, and describes it this way:

"I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt.

"Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking.

"Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around.

"But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others."

Knowing how radically hospitable all of us at Shir Tikvah are, I doubt any of us is walking fast in the racist direction on this moving walkway of racism. None of us knowingly perpetuates systemic oppression along racial lines. That's not us.

But are you standing still on this moving walkway of racism, and therefore, whether intentionally or not, along for the ride?

Or are you actively walking backwards against racism and oppression and fighting the tide?

Elie Wiesel, who survived the Holocaust and wrote famously about it, said in his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986:

“I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

“Sometimes we must interfere.

“When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant.

“Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.”

As we enter these sacred days of awe and reflection, I plan to continue to embrace as fully as I can the fact that in America, I am both the oppressor and oppressed.

I am both Abraham and Isaac simultaneously.

And I return in my mind to that moment on top of Mount Moriah, and the Akedat Yitzhak.

As Abraham raised his hand up to kill his son, who was left to speak for Isaac?

Only God was.

And what if God were not present to speak in defense of the oppressed in that moment. What then?

In a moment of amateur Torah interpreting, I imagine Abraham stopping for a moment of his own volition, and leaning down to Isaac, bound, considering whether to untie him and let him go free.

Isaac might have drawn on a now famous quote attributed to an aboriginal woman from the 20th century, responding,

Father...

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

When we realize, as Jews, that our own humanity is stripped when the humanity of others’ is stripped, now we have a call to action—

Not to save others, not even to help others, but to fight along side others for their humanity, dignity and liberation, because our humanity is bound up with theirs.

In 5776, let us work together on that.

L’Shanah Tovah.