

In preparing, I asked my self: What do I want to say to you. What do I need you to know, today, on Yom Kippur. And who am I to tell you? I think about that a lot – who am I in relation to this congregation, this community. I'm the director of an organization that serves this community, and also asks a lot of you. And I'm a member of this congregation. It can be hard to hold some of these those roles at the same time. I'm a board member, and sometimes when I usher at Shabbat, I find myself only talking to people about JCA. Or while I'm sitting in the library reading while my kids are in religious school. It can be hard to know how to just BE in the congregation and not feel that I'm working. Sometimes Jewish becomes such a thing that I do that I forget how it feels to just be. So rather than fight all of that, I'm just going to step into it here, and be all of those things here with you.

And I look out and see JCA members, board members, and staff. I see the doctor who delivered my son, I look into the choir and see the nurse midwife who delivered my daughter. And I see both of my children here, squirming their way through the adult service just to hear mom speak. I see my husband, who isn't Jewish, who in making a family with me threw his lot in with mine and joined our community wholeheartedly. I'm accountable to so many of you in this room. We're accountable to each other. That can feel like a tremendous responsibility, but also, today, on our holiest day and one of not just atonement but forgiveness, it feels like a blessing. And I'm going to talk to you about racial justice and resistance, and our community's flawed inheritance. But I'll start with Cain and Abel.

To recap, for those who don't remember or who haven't yet read, or who just like a good story, Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve after they were cast out of Eden. They had sisters, too, but they were obviously perfect and never did anything wrong, since I can't think of any other reason the text isn't about them.

Cain is the first birth in the Torah. The first person born to another person. To people who were cursed. His brother Abel follows. They are given roles: Cain tills the soil and Abel tends the flock. The soil Cain tills is, of course, cursed. God cursed the soil before he was even born. When he and his brother approach God with offerings, his is disappointing. Of course it is. Abel has the fattest sheep and Cain has fruit grown from cursed soil. And God accepts Abel's offering and rebuffs Cain's. God turns his back on Cain, and furious, Cain kills his brother. The first man born in the Torah becomes the first murderer. He makes his brother the first death.

I think it means something that the first man born to a person in the Torah takes the first life. I think his humanity is important. In social justice work, we draw heavily, or lean heavily on the concept of b'tselem elohim, the idea that we're all made in the image of God. We are all made equally from the divine and are all uniquely valuable. It's a powerful way to describe what connects us as humans. We use it to build empathy – with victims of police violence, with undocumented immigrants. It's the way we put words to what we hope we all would just feel – that everyone is valuable, not matter how they got here, no matter what they do. It's how we articulate what connects us to people we've never even met, why we care what happens to them.

There's nothing about being made in the image of God that means we're perfect. Cain is messy and flawed and his brother bears that burden and loses his life. And they are both made in the

image of God. There is so much responsibility in being human and we're going to hurt each other. We're going to make mistakes because we were designed to.

Cain meets Abel in a field, ready to argue, and he kills him. And God comes to Cain and asks where Abel is. God knows what happened to Abel and doesn't need to ask. So why does God bother to ask? God wants Cain to tell the truth. Today is Yom Kippur, a day to atone, to reflect, to tell the truth. I need to tell you some truth, too. Like MJ sang last night, I didn't come to fool you.

First. As a community, we've done a deep dive into our white privilege in the name of working for racial justice. We've gone to trainings – I've conducted them – we've read books like *How Jews Became White Folks*, and articles like last year's *As Jews atone on Yom Kippur*, we need to confront our White Privilege in the *Washington Post*. Many of us want to understand who we are and where to stand in the fight for racial equality in America, so we studied our path in becoming white and sought to understand the privileges that were granted us.

We've haven't been getting this right. That's the first truth. I did a training a few years ago with a friend and colleague, also Jewish. A black Jew. And I will never forget this - she held up a copy of *How Jews Became White Folks*, and said, "I could rub this book all over me and I will never become white."

White Jews need to do the work we've been doing to understand how to be allies in fighting white supremacy, but somewhere we mistook the racial identity and privilege conveyed to some of us as individuals as an identifier for our whole community. We're a multiracial community. Some of us are white. But in generalizing our community as white, we've cast ourselves as allies to people who live outside it, and we fall short of supporting - and seeing – Jews of color. Or Jews with origins in the Middle East or South America or Asia. Or Jews whose family history is not one of immigration at all. We've simplified our story, taken the Ashkenazi journey to whiteness and made it the story of American Jews. We've marginalized members of our own community, made them invisible. I'm sorry we've done that. We're capable as a community of sitting with deeper complexity; we have shortchanged ourselves.

Next truth. Even for white Jews, our whiteness does not protect us from anti-Semitism. Our rates of home ownership and college graduation have not made neo-Nazis okay with us. Our privilege is conditional, and if anything, our whiteness makes it easier for anti-Semitism to be brushed aside as not actually very threatening. Our president – sigh – tells the nation that some of those neo-Nazis in Charlottesville were fine people. Can you believe that? A woman was killed. But I'm not just talking about neo-Nazis, in the days following what happened in Charlottesville, some of us felt the sting of having the anti-Semitism erased from those rallies by our own friends. Men chanted "Jews will not replace us," and yet when our anti-racist partners demanded justice, in some of those demands, we felt forgotten. We were forgotten.

Truth. It stung. It hurt. A Jewish friend, a longtime racial justice activist told me it felt like a door had closed. She didn't want to make a big deal out of it because she didn't want to prioritize her own fear when other communities were experiencing much more urgent attacks, and from systems, from institutions. But the truth is it hurt, some of us felt truly isolated.

Last fall, not long after the election, I was attacked by Nazis on Twitter. A neighbor discovered a giant swastika painted on the garage of an abandoned home in North Minneapolis, where I live. A friend of mine, a black organizer, and I went together to clean it off. I went to Home Depot

and bought paint remover and we scrubbed together in the cold until it was as gone as it could be, and then because we couldn't believe that a few hours earlier, there had literally been a giant swastika right there on a house on the Northside, we took pictures and tweeted them.

Within a few days, racist and anti-Semitic trolls attacked. They said we'd painted it ourselves for attention, or because leftists are intent on proving hate exists. Look, black women and their Jewish girlfriends don't have to work hard to prove hate exists. So, exposed as a hoax and targeted for having committed the crime of being black and Jewish and women and publicly fighting white supremacy, we got hammered for days. I received pictures of myself photoshopped into Holocaust memes. My face was zoomed in on and analyzed for my Jewish features. My friend was merely the pet, I was her puppeteer. Some were violent, some explicit. There was one guy who kept tweeting my picture and comparing me to a young Howard Stern. Which is probably fair. But most were threatening, and most focused on my identity as a Jew and hers as a black woman and the fact that we had done this together. My friend told me she didn't know anti-Semitism existed anymore. She'd thought it was an artifact. Something historical. "I thought you guys were normal white people," she said. "Right?" I answered. "We did, too."

Cain doesn't tell God the truth. God asks where is Abel and Cain answers, famously, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Why lie to someone who already knows the truth? I try to put myself in Cain's shoes and I think about how scary it is to tell the truth when you're all alone.

That's the function of anti-Semitism – to isolate Jews, to position us as an invisible buffer between the oppressed and oppressor. Conditionally safe. We get privilege but never full acceptance. We are exalted as powerful by those who wish to destroy us because it separates us from the people we think of as our most likely allies in fighting them. If everyone believes that the rich white Jews are funding the anti-racist resistance, white supremacists will blame us while black activists will feel used, controlled, resentful. We end up alone, vulnerable. A scapegoat.

I pause here, because the idea of our community being used as a scapegoat is interesting to think about today. The traditional Yom Kippur text is from Leviticus, the expulsion into the wilderness of the scapegoat—the "goat for Azazel," carrying upon him all the inequities of the Israelites. A literal vessel to carry our sins away from us. Today, though, we're reading Cain and Abel, a story that does the opposite – pushes us to stand and face our flaws, pushes us to ask ourselves questions we already know the answers to in order to tell the truth. To really atone is to hold our flaws close, not send them away. And if we've been made the vessel for others to cast off their sins, a scapegoat, it's not a role we have to accept.

God asked Cain what happened to Abel. God gave Cain a chance to tell the truth. And he couldn't. Or he just didn't. And yes, he was alone, but remember, Cain was alone because in his anger at having been handed cursed ground, and in his pain at being rejected by God, he pushed his brother away. He turned inward and destroyed the person that might have supported him. In his pain, he made himself alone. And they were both made in the image of God, and Cain's destiny was bound together with Abel's – after he killed Abel, God sent Cain to wander, separated him from the land that was his birthright, never to return.

Here's another truth, or maybe a question. When we've found ourselves alone, are there times when it's because we've isolated ourselves? When we have assumed likely allyship based on a historical relationship that we haven't kept up? When have we been hurt that other communities

have scheduled something a date that's significant to us without understanding why it might be significant to them? When we have criticized tactics without understanding the demands? or wordsmithed statements? or disavowed groups that we never had a relationship with in the first place? When have we relied on an image of Heschel marching with King because we didn't have a more recent example of solidarity? We've been relying on Heschel praying with his feet for more than 50 years. His feet are exhausted.

Another truth: B'tselem elohim, the recognition of God in a stranger is not a shortcut to actually knowing them. I can recognize your humanity and fight for you, but we are stronger if we fight together, on equal terms, not because we want to help each other but because our destinies are firmly entwined. We are strongest in relationship. Those take time, and they're messy. That's by design – remember, we're messy on purpose. We need to stay in relationships when it's hard. When we feel invisible, when we accidentally make someone else invisible.

When we've found ourselves alone, when has that been an opportunity to make a connection?

When I was being attacked by Twitter Nazis, I was scared for my safety. I use my real name on the internet, I am a professional Jew in public, my address is listed. I knew rationally that the anonymity and distance that enabled these trolls to come after me online would also probably protect me from having to encounter them physically in my world. But I was deeply shaken, my anxiety was out of control, I was drained. And I got through it, because of my friends. They took my phone away and blocked the trolls so I wouldn't have to see all of the tweets. They fed me meals. A dozen of my girlfriends in other states coordinated a donation to JCA in honor of fighting Nazis. From all around, I felt held, and supported.

We say that our inheritance as Jews is a broken world. Like Cain inherited cursed soil, we received a world in need of repair. We entered it broken, like Cain, but we can choose to care for it, to tend it. We can choose to bring each other closer, not isolate ourselves.

I believe our other inheritance is resilience. Some people think resilience is the ability to bounce back, but I like the way the American Psychological Association defines it – as adaptation in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or stress. I learned that not from a psychologist but from Rabbi Deborah Waxman, the President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. I had the privilege, in a dark moment, to receive some of her teaching on resilience, and I wanted to share just a tiny bit with you.

Resilience is not coming back from something terrible, it's adapting in the current moment to terrible circumstances. I went to a training once, on how to fight racism as people of faith, and the facilitator said, "We talk about safe spaces, but my job is not to keep things from hurting you in this space, it's to help you be resilient enough to deal with painful things and keep doing the work." That's what our community has always done. That's our job right now – to support each other through challenging times, knowing that sometimes we will be messy. And we will work in relationship, because none of the paths through this moment can be managed alone.

The last truth, another question. When we've thought ourselves alone, when have we really not been? When have we been guided by our ancestors, our shared story of survival. When have we looked around to find ourselves sitting in a full congregation, in community, on our holiest day, together?