

Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt
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I had the privilege this summer of visiting Acadia National Park in Bar Harbor, Maine. Vast ocean views, pine tree forests, soft, still ponds. As I drove my family off of the island- the cute town with coffee shops, bike stores and bakeries smelling of freshly baked biscuits I noticed the streets lined with the American flag. Every block another flag- red, white and blue. Blowing in the slight breeze of summer- maybe left over from the quaint July 4th parade- soldiers dressed in uniform, firefighters, local police, lawn chairs lined on the side of the road- cheering- cheering for freedom, for liberty, for opportunity, for apple pie and the American Dream. I cheered to myself, in my heart in my mind as I thought of my own pride.

That was my first look. As I kept driving, staring at the flag- I heard another voice- the voice of a writer who has become ingrained into my being. Ta Nehisi Coates- I heard these words he wrote to his son “I did not want to raise you in fear or false memory. I did not want you to be forced to mask your joys and blind your eyes. What I wanted for you was to grow into consciousness. I resolved to hide nothing from you.

Do you remember when I first took you to work, you were thirteen? I was going to see the mother of a dead black boy. The boy had exchanged hard words with a white man and been killed, because he refused to turn down his music. The killer, having emptied his gun, drove his girlfriend to a hotel. They had drinks. They ordered a pizza. And then the next day, at his leisure, the man turned himself in. “ (Coates 112)

In this moment I saw the flag- I saw dead black bodies, slavery, shame of a past we seek to hide- I saw faces where rising is a far off dream- where fear of survival of the walk from school to home or the drive from work to home is the heritage passed down from generation to generation. In that moment I saw both truths. Both stories-

I heard in my head the whispers of my teacher Rabbi David Hartman alav hashalom saying “Build a heart of many rooms” a heart where multiple truths can exist and it is the job of every human being not to just bask in the glory of the good, but to also see the pain, see the ugly, see the wound- hold it, face it, unmask it-

This is hard. And it is why this has been taught to us as part of the life practice and discipline of Judaism for thousands of years. So that when your mind tells you there is only one story, one truth, one way- the voices of the rabbis enter through whispers in your head and say- expand, expand, “make yourself a heart of many rooms”. Or as Hartman said himself, “become for yourself a religious person who can live with multiple truths, who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity”.

The Talmud Bavli in Tractate Hagigah teaches about the discipline of expansive thinking saying,

“The masters of assemblies”: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing unclean and others pronouncing clean, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.

Should a person say: How in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: “All of them are given from One Shepherd.” One God gave them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; for it is written: “And God spoke all these words.” ***Also make your ear like the hopper and get yourself a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce unclean and the words of those who pronounce clean.*** (BT Hagigah 3b)

What the rabbis were telling us in this passage was that there are multiple truths in the world and they were set into motion by Ha Kodesh Baruch Hu. The job of a religious person is to “Get yourself a perceptive heart to understand the words” of both.

Hear the Star Spangled Banner and the triumphs. Hear the opportunities, the dreams and the hopes and triumphs of our ancestors. But don’t stop there. Hear the pain too. The pain of black bodies that were chained on boats- feel the sweat and the tears, the broken families, the slave labor that built the first colonies, cities, industries without rights, without freedom, without dignity. Feel the fear that is so similar to our own ingrained fear of the horrors of the past. That to be black in America is hard and frightening and different from the experience of being white. This too is our story. This too is in our flag. This too is ours to struggle with, to shed tears, to own, and to face.

And let this not be an issue where we say that racism, our broken criminal justice system is far from us, it is too great for us, it is for others to resolve. Because the story of Ferguson, of Baltimore, of Staten Island, of Charleston South Carolina is very close to us. It is right here, in our gates.

1 year ago, I was sitting in my office working on a dvar Torah when there was a knock on the door. I opened the door and in stepped one of our beloved teachers from the Gan. Someone who has served this community many years with her soft, loving presence, her responsible and upright character- someone whom our children love. She sat down and began to cry. Thinking it was an issue in the Gan I said she could tell me what was going on and I would help fix it.

She said, this problem will take a whole country to fix. It was her boyfriend. He had been out with friends and was returning home late in the night. He had encountered 2 police officers while crossing the street, words were exchanged, he began to leave the scene and was shot in the back and killed. She had heard commotion from the

window of her apartment and went out to see her unarmed boyfriend lying dead in the middle of the road.

Her weeping was for the man she loved. A good man, someone with whom she was planning to build a future.

She said the thing is--- it's not just my pain- it's the pain of so many like me. Stories beyond stories of people who are gunned down- unarmed- because of the color of their skin.

It hit me in that moment. Racism is not just a terrible epidemic in our country- out there- it has reached the space within our own walls. Within the synagogue. It has touched our family.

What will we do?

In President Obama's eulogy to the beloved Reverend Pickney who was shot down in Church- in the midst of Bible study -because of the color of his skin---Obama said:

Over the course of centuries, black churches served as "hush harbors" where slaves could worship in safety; praise houses where their free descendants could gather and shout hallelujah -- rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement. They have been, and continue to be, community centers where we organize for jobs and justice; places of scholarship and network; places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm's way, and told that they are beautiful and smart -- and taught that they matter. That's what happens in church.

That's what the black church means. Our beating heart. The place where our dignity as a people is inviolate. When there's no better example of this tradition than Mother Emanuel -- a church built by blacks seeking liberty, burned to the ground because its founder sought to end slavery, only to rise up again, a Phoenix from these ashes.

When there were laws banning all-black church gatherings, services happened here anyway, in defiance of unjust laws. When there was a righteous movement to dismantle Jim Crow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached from its pulpit, and marches began from its steps. A sacred place, this church. Not just for blacks, not just for Christians, but for every American who cares about the steady expansion -- of human rights and human dignity in this country; a foundation stone for liberty and justice for all. That's what the church meant.

Upon hearing these words- I thought of our story- the story of a people whose bodies and books were burned- who were thought of as vermon as unworthy of space and place, unworthy of citizenship, of rights to own land, rights to citizenship or freedom to worship. A people instantly stripped of dignity, families torn a part, where the smoke

stacks of burning bodies remain part of our heritage, the stories of our families not distant or ancient but right here, with us today.

The story of our people's shelter- the hidden shtibel, the shul that looked like a storefront with a room in the back where the words Shema Yisrael Adonai, Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad could be heard as a declaration, as a statement that no matter what was taken from us, they couldn't take our faith and our connection to our Maker.

The synagogue was the place of our hope- where during the Shoah Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmisch Shapira, the Hasidic rabbi of Piaseczno would preach in the Warsaw ghetto on Shabbat. Giving the people a sense of hope and dignity in the face of utter calamity.

It was the place of ritual where Shabbat candles were lit in secret and chanukkah candles to bring light into a very dark world.

And it was the place of resistance and planning in a world that could not make room for us as a people. A place where freedom fighters in the Warsaw ghetto hid ammunition and held secret meetings to plan the revolt of 1943.

And it was the place where master teachers such as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught from bimot saying, "Man is born to be concerned with ultimate issues. When he refuses to care, he ceases to be human." And it was from this very bimah, that for the first time in a synagogue, Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr, alav hashalom addressed the Jewish community during the civil rights movement.

Our synagogue in the 21st century remains a refuge. It is a place where we can see each other, where we can gather in joy and sorrow. But if it is only that- we miss the grand heritage of what our ancestors taught us. That the synagogue is also the place where we must confront what we experience in the outer world. Where are walls become glass- where we can see out- so that we do not come here to escape the ills of the world, but we come here to grapple, to learn to hold multiple truths, to see with more than our eyes and to hear with more than our ears- so that we can leave the threshold of these doors on Quebec street and help to be healers, builders, lovers. So that the Torah of multiple truths, more than one story, the Torah of justice and love has disciples putting its teachings into action in the world. So that the books on our shelves do not sit as a remnant of history, but a breathing, living guide for how we treat each other not only in the pews but in the streets. So that the hopes, aspirations and words of the siddur do not get sung out of obligation but because these words drive us to do better, to uncover the holy, the ugly and the pure and to help be actors in creation to make a world we can be proud of.

So that when we call out tomorrow in the Zichronot section of musaf saying to God

Before you stands revealed all that is hidden, and every mystery from the moment of creation. Nothing is forgotten in Your awe-inspiring presence, nothing concealed from Your gaze; Take account of every being, every soul, (Mahzor Lev Shalem pg 134)

Let us put full intention with our words. Just as we ask God to remember every human being- every soul- to be written for life- so too may we take that command on ourselves. To uncover what is hard in ourselves and our world and- to build a world that honors life- all kinds, all colors.

In the words of our ancient tradition- from the Talmud Bavli Tractate Brachot I would like to bless us with the words of our great teachers:

*May you see your world in your lifetime,
 may your future be for the life of the world that is coming,
 and your hope for generations of generations.
 May your heart meditate with understanding
 and your mouths speak wisdoms (hokhmot).
 May your tongue be moved to songs (rananot).
 May your eyelids look straight before you;
 may your eyes shine with the light of the Torah,
 your face be radiant, like the brightness of the firmament.
 May your lips utter wisdom,
 and your kidneys rejoice in righteousness.
 May your steps run to hear the words of the Ancient of Days.*

And may we not shy away from that which is dark and difficult- may we see every wound and difficulty as a place of potential to bring empathy, justice, love, and light. May we be inscribed in the great book of life. Amen