

“For Our Failures of Justice:’ History, Atonement and Yom Kippur”

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A week ago, a sound rang out, calling those within its circle to attention.

On September 29th, Jewish people around the world gathered for Rosh Hashanah, an observance falling at the beginning of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar. “Rosh Hashanah” is translated as “the head of the year” as the beginning of the seventh month marks the transition from one year to the next.

This time is signified by the blowing of the shofar, an instrument crafted from a ram’s horn. The ritual of blowing the shofar is central to Rosh Hashanah; the biblical name for the holiday is Yom Teruah, meaning “a day for shouting or blasting.”¹ This sound is made to rouse its listeners from the grogginess of everyday life. As named in rabbinic writings, the message of the shofar is "Awake, sleepers from your sleep, and slumberers arise from your slumber!"²

It is helpful that the faithful are roused in this way. Rosh Hashanah signifies the beginning of a time of great engagement. It is a festive holiday, with feasts including sweet, delicious foods, shared in hopes of a sweet new year. Then begins a ten-day period, the Days of Awe, when one considers their deeds over the past year and makes amends to those they have wronged. This period culminates in Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, when the faithful seek atonement for their sins in hope that G-d will inscribe their name in the Book of Life. The joyous festivity of Rosh Hashanah is balanced by the solemnity of Yom Kippur, an observance of self-sacrifice through fasting and humbling one’s self before the Holy. At the conclusion of Yom Kippur, the shofar sounds again; the High Holy Days are complete. This morning, we gather amid these great Days of Awe.

As someone not raised in the Jewish tradition, I admire the inherent wisdom of these practices. Any observance that endures across so many generations must reflect an essential truth about human nature and human need. There is a rigorous candor at the heart of the High Holy Days that invites people of all faiths

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosh_Hashanah

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shofar>

to follow suit, to celebrate the blessings of life and to take solemn responsibility for our shortcomings. As no one is beyond cause for gratitude, no one is exempt from needing to make amends. This is part what it means to be human; Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur remind us there is health in paying attention to life's bounty and being honest about our failings.

Much of this honesty relates to our individual actions. We hear this in the litany we read together this morning: "For using others as a means to gratify our desires...For withholding love to control those we claim to love...For hiding from others behind an armor of mistrust..."

But seeking atonement for our "sins" - the word "sin" derived from a word meaning "to miss the mark" - also has a collective dimension. Again reflected in this morning's litany, Yom Kippur asks us to acknowledge how we have taken part in systemic exploitation and oppression: "For keeping the poor in the chains of poverty and turning a deaf ear to the cry of the oppressed...For obeying criminal orders, and for the sin of silence and indifference. For poisoning the air, and polluting land and sea and for all the evil means we employ to accomplish good ends. For our failures of justice."

The Jewish tradition offers additional wisdom in this broader understanding of atonement. Another time the shofar is sounded is Jubilee, a period every fifty years when debts are forgiven and prisoners and slaves are freed, as commanded in the Book of Leviticus.

Jubilee is the culmination of seven cycles of seven years. Deuteronomy dictates that every seven years, the wealthy must give generously to the poor. Specifically, in chapter 15, verses 12 – 15, the Jewish people are instructed, "if any of your people...sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the Lord your G-d has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your G-d redeemed you."³

These sacred times come periodically – the sighting of the moon at the beginning of the seventh month, the ending of the Days of Awe, the sabbath year, Jubilee.

³ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+15&version=NIV>

When they come, we are invited to “arise from our slumber” - or “to get woke” in modern parlance. We are asked to appreciate life, to consider our role within it and to seek forgiveness and redemption for our shortcomings.

As we approached the Days of Awe this year, my mind kept turning towards the *collective* practice of atonement. And I believe it kept turning in that way as this year is a significant anniversary – “one of these times.”

This year, 2019, is 400 years after the first recorded ship, bearing enslaved African people, landed on the shores of what is now the United States. In the words of Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, “The landing of the first recorded Africans at Point Comfort in 1619 marked the moment African culture became an integral part of American culture and an indelible influence on the development of our nation...The early relationship between the un-free Africans and English in the Virginia colony is complicated, yet their forced arrival set into motion an important African imprint on every aspect of American society and culture. Moreover, Africans' fight for freedom, equality, and inclusion was transformative because it began our nation on its journey toward racial equality – something we are still working toward today.”⁴

I am grateful to the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates for a recurring message in his work: there is no telling the American story, there is no understanding of American identity, without acknowledging slavery and its legacy. Stated plainly, Coates writes in his famous essay “The Case for Reparations,” “America begins in black plunder and white democracy, two features that are not contradictory but complementary.”⁵ In this way, there are two threads of American beginnings, one in 1619 and the other in 1776, two entwined stories – one of bondage and one of liberty. As we begin this month exploring “belonging” together, I am mindful of the challenge of seeing these national narratives as “complimentary” and equally true to history.

As someone with white skin privilege, these days of self-examination and the anniversary of the first arrival of African people to this land moves me to consider how I have – consciously and unconsciously – maintained cultures and systems of white supremacy. I am inspired to consider how many of my financial assets are a

⁴ <https://www.nps.gov/fomr/learn/news/2019-commemoration-of-the-first-african-landing.htm>

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

result of racial benefits. Simply, as a white person, I ask what I owe people-of-color. This time moves me to ask what authentic racial atonement looks like, what constitutes true reparations.

Reflection on the idea of reparations to African Americans is not a far departure from Yom Kippur. Ta-Nehisi Coates begins his “Case for Reparations” with a passage from the Hebrew bible, the one in Deuteronomy outlining the terms of release and recompense for slaves every seven years: “in the seventh year you must let them go free. And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed.”

Those of you who have read “The Case for Reparations” know the essay is ambitious, if only by word count alone. And it speaks very little about what reparations should be but more about how throughout history African Americans, through institutionalized bias and hateful acts by individuals, have been subject to significant land theft and property loss. Coates details this history, beginning with exploitation through sharecropping to redlining to, more recently, predatory mortgages called “ghetto loans” in the early 2000’s. The essay is literally a case, demonstrating systemic and transgenerational theft from African Americans first by white farmers then white realtors and then white banks, all reinforced by state and federal bureaucracies led by white officials.

Coates’s compelling work brought reparations to African Americans back into the national consciousness. For the idea of reparations has been ignored, derided and challenged in the mainstream each time it has been raised.

Knowing some of America’s racialized history and having read Coates’s “Case,” I join Peter Birkenhead, the author of this morning’s reading in asking, “How can it be that, rather than participating in a national reckoning like those provided by...Germany’s many post-war acts of national self-reflection and atonement, America is barely humoring the idea of paying reparations to the descendants of former slaves?” I join Birkenhead in wondering why – he says “a white man;” I say “white people” – don’t acknowledge and atone for our part in America’s racial history “without the buffer of mediating, academic language, bluntly, poetically, vividly, humanely and unforgivingly, eye-to-eye, person-to-person, unafraid of the truth?”

One obstacle to such an honest acknowledgement of our piece in someone else's oppression, whoever we may be, is the strange phenomena of binary judgments. Either we are innocent victims or cruel oppressors. America is a land of freedom or brutal enslavement. Celebration or suffering. To use the language of Twelve-Step Recovery, to engage in a "searching and fearless moral inventory," whether we do so as an individual or as a nation, means embracing our complex and contradictory natures that create a complete self. As Coates says in our Centering Thought: "the question really is not whether we'll be tied to the somethings of our past, but whether we are courageous enough to be tied to the whole of them."

I appreciate a point Coates makes in the reprinting of his "Reparations" essay in his book, *We Were Eight Years in Power*. In a preface to the essay, Coates affirms that an act of reparation – a repair, an act of atonement – should not require that the aggrieved be purely innocent. To repair a relationship is to simply acknowledge that we have done harm, regardless of the actions of the other party. Coates writes that "there is nothing ennobling about being a victim... Reparations are not reserved for the unimpeachably virtuous and cannot solve the problems of human morality."⁶ We are thus further encouraged to set aside unrealistic caricatures of villains and victims in considering our responsibility to our fellow citizens.

And the "case" to atone for harm transcends time and generation. When Coates testified before Congress in favor of reparations to African Americans, he directly addressed Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who spoke against reparations because "none of us currently living are responsible [for slavery.]"⁷ Coates countered, in part, by acknowledging that McConnell assumed:

a strange theory of governance, that American accounts are somehow bound by the lifetime of its generations. But...we honor treaties that date back some 200 years, despite no one being alive who signed those treaties. Many of us would love to be taxed for the things we are solely and individually responsible for. But we are American citizens, and thus bound

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https://books.google.com/books?id=Zx1xDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA160&lpg=PA160&dq=%22Reparations+are+not+reserved+for+the%22+coates&source=bl&ots=mUV8Jlvoix&sig=ACfU3U0CQcYDNa_0OfgVqNpOV798rolk4A&hl=en&ppis=e&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiM4e3iyYPIAhWNEMAKHSwwAy0Q6AEwAnoECAYQAQ#v=onepage&q=%22Reparations%20are%20not%20reserved%20for%20the%22%20coates&f=false

⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/18/politics/mitch-mcconnell-opposes-reparations-slavery/index.html>

to a collective enterprise that extends beyond our individual and personal reach. It would seem ridiculous to dispute invocations of the Founders, or the Greatest Generation, on the basis of a lack of membership in either group.⁸

While Coates makes a strong “case for reparations,” holding us living in this time accountable for the financial and social debt, he does not speak to what reparations should be in tangible terms. Instead, Coates speaks to the cultural benefits of such a process. He writes that reparations would foster a “national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal...Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.” To experience such renewal would mean setting aside the simple story of the United States as a bastion of liberty for a more complex one rooted in the full truth. Coates further affirms in the essay’s reprinting that, “the hardest part of paying reparations would not be the outlay of money. It would be acknowledging that their most cherished myth was not real.”⁹

On August 25th, a sound rang out around the country, calling those within its circle to attention.

The National Parks Service invited all the parks in its system and partner communities to participate in a nationwide bellringing ceremony. Called “a day of healing,” we were invited to ring bells at 3:00 pm for four minutes, symbolizing the four centuries Africans and their descendants have been part of the fabric of our nation. Reflecting the complexity of this history, the Parks Service affirmed that “Bells...are rung for joy, sorrow, alarm, and celebration...universal concepts in each of our lives.”¹⁰

That day, a handful of people gathered – some from within, some beyond this community - on the large steps of our building. With John Kramer’s assistance, at exactly 3pm, our great bells rang for four minutes. We below the tower sat

⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/06/ta-nehisi-coates-testimony-house-reparations-hr-40/592042/>

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https://www.google.com/books/edition/We_Were_Eight_Years_in_Power/Zx1xDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=beryI

¹⁰ <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/partnerships/bell-ringing-for-400th.htm>

together in silence, simply bearing witness. This being “one of these [sacred] times,” there were no words fitting for the moment.

The bell ringing ceremony and the anniversary it recognized served to make me more “awake from my slumber.” More so than ever, I am now inspired to risk the myth of my racial innocence in exchange for greater personal integrity. In the spirit of Yom Kippur, an observance that links living in right relationship with our neighbor with receiving life’s blessings, I am inspired to change my ways and seek forgiveness through a changed self.

The possibility of transformation does not just rest in the individual. Our nation would benefit from heeding the prophetic candor of the High Holy Days. We would benefit from making an honest acknowledgement of our collective moral failing while also affirming this land as a people and a place where freedom and dignity are cherished. We would benefit from finding truth in both of these stories. Through such a collective act, we would lose a cherished myth about American identity and we would reap the blessings of “spiritual renewal.”

As the sound of the bells has faded and we are “awake from our slumber,” may it be a good new year.