

The Torah of Race
A Developing Text, an Ongoing Conversation
Kolot Chayeinu/Voices of Our Lives
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BEREISHIT / GENESIS

In the beginning....

I saw the first black girls in Brownsville on the corner, stared, and they asked me what I was looking at. I was curious.

God created the laws of nature – physics, chemistry, biology – and the raw material for life on earth. Over billions of years they led, slowly and randomly, to the evolution of the wide variety of life on earth, including people, the first of whom – the ancestor of us all – was most likely dark-skinned.

No one saw race differently.

God created everyone the same

I thought there were no Black Jews

I thought Jews had nothing to do with “race.”

I didn’t think about race because I didn’t have to

I saw differences in wealth before differences in color

I was a Jew living in Vienna, Austria. I felt what it is like to not belong. I hope we can eliminate this feeling forever and everyone.

I grew up in a multiracial city and did not understand how unusual it was to have African-American friends in elementary school

It was hard to find other white people who were concerned about fighting racism but I found JFREJ and Kolot. The beginning is still now but it is becoming easier.

I saw fear and felt afraid. I felt confused and wanted to know why fear existed.

We were all first in line.

There were people of many colors, backgrounds, cultures, and histories, who were all created equal.

We were all and nothing, all and none.

God created a world where the unknown was not awesome but scary

We really were all created equally. Historical and social factors have moved us away from this basic human point. We must restore it!

We acknowledge that we can reinvent the way we see.

I was embarrassed to talk about race because I was the only one who wasn't white.

It wasn't easy to categorize MY Judaism. With such a mix of worlds and ethnicities I tried to bring both religion and race together. As I grow older I begin to expose both and recognize and appreciate that they are different.

God created Black people. God led some of them north and some of them became white. But God values Black people as the original image of God.

We were all created in the multiple images of God – female and male, Black and yellow and white and all were equal.

Growing up in the 60's, I thought I understood the contours and parameters of race and racism

I grew up in Park Slope with a very anti-racist family but a feeling of white privilege that I took for granted

The Williamsburg Bridge separated our Jewish neighborhood from what was then Alphabet City

Something weird happened. Then there was DNA and lots of evolutions of species, eventually humans. Humans traveled to a lot of places and started to look different because of climate. People made judgments about those who looked different, and systems of power and oppression arose out of competition for resources and prestige.

We all lived in Africa. There was slavery and now there is mass incarceration of people of color.

God created light and dark, night and day, Black and white, all necessary, all belong in this created place.

People were brown.

I saw no differences. Then I was taught by peers to look and see differences.

1950's, Hollis, Queens only had Jews and Catholics. My public school had one person of another race, a Chinese student

There was us
We built a bridge

My children, born and raised in diverse Brooklyn, never defined or described new friends, teachers or people they met by the color of their skin.

I wanted to wear my hair braided with beads, like the kids in my neighborhood. When I did, I was made fun of because I didn't have "that kind" of hair.

God created the least of the molecules that form the basis of life in our universe. They then developed in all directions and all forms and added colors for beauty. From the beauty came race, a useless measurement.

We were African.

Some of us were slaves and some of us were free. On the first day some of us thought we were free. On the second day, some of us had enough, because some did not

God created two little children of opposite color, size and gender, and they loved each other's smiles and became great friends.

I don't know

There was emotion. It radiated outward and suffused all life

Humans of all races created God in their images

It was difficult and upsetting to think that people are treated differently because of the color of their skin.

When I moved to a small New England town, was the question: "Which church do you go to?" I had to learn what it meant to be Jewish, I had to teach my middle school classmates. I am still learning.

Human life came out of Africa and humans didn't care what color the others' skin was

Race wasn't important.

I needed to be honest with myself about how many of my assumptions are rooted in the privilege of being white and middle class.

It all seemed normal to be who you were

There was no segregation and my first best friend was black. And he is still my best friend

We were all Africans. We were asleep. We were awake. We listened to one another. We are renewed.

In a small Jersey town shadowed by the presence of the Klan, I thought Jews and Blacks were together and didn't understand all the segregation and prejudice

God really screwed up, making people so parochial

As a new teacher I had students of many races. A friend asked me for the races or ethnicity of my class. I couldn't answer, I had never counted.

God created the human race. God gave people different skin colors, traditions, characteristics, and geographic circumstances, but afforded each person dignity and righteousness in equal measure. Man quickly forgot this, and after much war and hate, was left to rebuild and restore.

Race didn't matter.

There was love....

My parents would not let me visit one of the two black girls in my class at my suburban private school because she lived in an inner city neighborhood. Much later, as a young reporter, I was the only white

person who went to _____ West End when African-American colleague invited the newsroom to come over and watch "Eyes on the Prize."

I knew there were people who were different. Some I liked and some I was afraid of.

There were people of all races, all different, none superior to any other

The struggle to build a world where race _ and the circumstances of birth – don't define what we can become, is what just might bring enabling meaning to the whole human race, after all.

One thousand faces

My white great grandparents came here on a boat and wanted so bad to have the Dream that they lost themselves. In the beginning, my other grandmother, working class and Cherokee, moved North to have the dream, but lost her stories

Peaceful co-existence, humanity, love and compassion are the keys to understanding our differences and similarities. There is no race. We are one.

HaShem created a world of people who could truly see and yet were color blind.

My friend across the street was an Asian girl named Eva. I didn't think of her life as different. In school, there was only one Black girl. I may have been a party to teasing her because she was Black. Near my house in Brooklyn I watched (?) some teen age boys burning an effigy and chanting, "Dig, nigger, die."

Our common humanity is our most fundamental bond

Our neighbor told 3 year-old me not to put coins in my mouth because Negroes had touched them

There was a thought, there was a word, there was a power assigned, then there was a power maintained and denied

I thought I would live my life surrounded with people of all races. It's not that way and I want it to be different.

We were free of racism

My first best friend in elementary school was Black

God created The WE, the ALL! The Everything!!

People look different. When we don't know what to say, I want to ignore visual differences but it is not always easy

I wondered if the question of race was a question relevant to my life, and if I saw my friends, classmates, and co-workers as unique selves they are or as a type to be categorized

We, like infants, saw no differences.

All were equal and nothing was established as right or wrong. All were beautiful and all choices were right. The world should return to being open-minded and not make rash opinions

I felt uncomfortable when people said things I disagreed with but I didn't know what to say back.

I came from a family of North and South — and was scared of the South.

The only place I've found race doesn't matter is in AA — a common, near-death experience transcends race, for an hour a day

In the beginning I was punished for speaking Yiddish in public

SHEMOT/EXODUS

I knew I had gotten free; I will know when we are free when...

I knew I had gotten free when I exercised true choice, when I lived in and owned the pause between emotion and response, and a deep new understanding of someone else, myself, or a situation rose up from my depth and I was shown a new way to perceive or act, one that was on a higher or more compassionate level than my conditioned or habitual responses had been. I knew I had gotten free when unconscious beliefs about myself, others and even God were suddenly revealed and I could start to heal them. I knew I had gotten free in those moments and situations when I defined myself, rather than depending on how others see me for my sense of worth, identity, and belongingness in the world.

I will know we are free when we are kind to each other above all.

I know we are free when we don't watch ourselves talking to each other, when we don't study ourselves and each other as specimens, when we don't self-congratulate or self-castigate, when we just talk, as distractedly, as unremarkably, as imperfectly as people who aren't watching themselves do

I will know we are free when no one has to stop to figure out my multi-racial family.

We will know we are free when:

There are none oppressed by Hunger, homelessness and violence

We are unafraid

Your sons are not in jail

We are not divided

I own my internalized racial inferiority and you own your racial superiority

All God's children have a place in the choir. Some sing lower, some sing higher, some sing out loud, on the telephone wire.

Ethiopian Jews aren't the only Black Jews you think of.

I saw her smile before her skin color.

We ask questions rather than defending our positions

You trusted me to tell my own story and you believed me

When we hear each person's voice loudly and clearly

When I could see brown faces on the bima, board and as leaders
and every segment of our society.

When all people are accepted and valued

When each person who takes the floor or enters, feels valued and heard

When leaders in every segment of society are brown or other than white
When there is at least one article in the media about how Kolot is the best
place to be for a multi cultural, diverse community
When if one of us is hurt or angry, the rest of us want to know and understand.
When we are curious about each others' experiences and listen to them like the wise son at the seder.

VA-YIKRA/LEVITICUS

Written by students at Hebrew College's Yom Iyyun on Race, March 2014

Sustaining and nourishing freedom requires...

I don't know
A sense of safety
Relationships of compassion with oppressors
Patience

The offering of our hearts was fit for the altar when...

Differences were no longer seen as blemishes that rendered the offerings impure

"To distinguish between the holy and the mundane"...

Our tradition gives us the powerful tool of separation, division, categorization.

The world was created through havdallah – light from darkness, day from night, Shabbat from work.

We humans serve as God's partners, continuing the work of creation, bringing holiness into our practices, our culture, our community.

But havdallah, separation, can be a dangerous tool. We must meld it with love, with kindness.

For if we separate people, alienate the other, oppress those who are not like us, we bring profanity into spaces that should and can be holy, we misuse the tools of our tradition. May we work to see the fullness of our community, may we break down divisions of hatred, racism and oppression.

May we allow room for, invite in, count among us the full range of humanity with love.

We are drawn close to God, ourselves, community, when....

We see ourselves reflected in our many-faceted hevra, when we have a spot at the metaphorical table or altar and are able to be challenged, teach and grow

I knew I was called when...

I found out I am a Jew of color

What can you offer towards ending racism?

VaYikra: We are drawn close to God, ourselves, community, when...

Each person's unique offerings are celebrated.

When our wandering Aramean fathers stand side by side with our contemporary intersecting identities, when our whole stories/selves are received

What can you sacrifice - give up, offer – to become closer to God?

My pride. My privilege. My ignorance.

My commitment to racial justice

My time

What does it mean to be holy as God is holy?

To look at the people that God has made and to see god's holiness reflected in each one.
To listen to each other's stories and recognize our shared humanity.

"Do not bear a grudge" by...

resenting those whose experience is different from yours

What is the fitting offering for this time? For this context? I would offer to this world:

A hope that cannot be undone by any system of oppression; a hope of a child's eyes

Drawing close to God means...

Staying in a room even when I'd rather be someplace else

As a person of privilege, implicit in systemic racism, what is your offering?

My heart, open and ready to listen

My mind, filled with courage

My body, a strong foundation

These are the commandments [Lev 22:34]

You shall figure out what the cost and benefit is to you of living under a system of racial domination, and that awareness shall influence your future actions and choices.

What does Jewish law look like today?

Interacting with society with the laws of taking care of the orphan, widow and stranger, as we were strangers in a strange land

VaYikra. When will You dwell among us?

I will dwell among you when you learn to encounter Me in the stranger's face

"And you should love your neighbor as yourself" – means tolerance

I feel excluded from participation because of my body when....

I enter a traditional Jewish prayer space

When racism works to isolate and separate, how can we fight to get close?

Who can enter the mishkan? Who do we send out of the camp? Why?

What rituals can we provide to help people prepare to re-enter the camp?

What rituals or processes do we need to atone for individual & communal sins of racism?

What sacrifices do we need to make on the altar of justice?

Our systems of power are just when...

They are rooted in humility and a clear awareness of each person's strength, pride and limitations, a curiosity-based appreciation of the other, and compassion for our shared suffering in dysfunctional systems

A gift I can give (to invite divine presence to dwell amongst and within us)...

Is to gently interrogate my own white privilege while fiercely acting on behalf of people of color and other marginalized people, both inside and outside the Jewish community

I hear God calling....

Each soul is a world, (a garden). How will you tend your own? How will you tend each other?

Tamei (impurity) / Tahor (purity)

See the delicate nature and fragility of real humanity, how one is made in God's image and how to support coming back into community

This is holy work because...

We forfeit the right to worship G-d when we are complicit in racial injustice

How much are we responsible for the deeds of our ancestors?

It's just the world they left us

My offering to come closer to You/bring You closer...

Is to try to slow my instinct to enact distinction/our separation long enough to experience and express a deep love and abiding curiosity

VaYikra (gifts/offerings) – Hibah (intimacy)

When all of our offerings are accepted in love, no one is too afraid or apathetic to offer her gifts

What have you sacrificed?

Personal sacrifice for the great good of the community

It is not kosher to not seek out new friends from groups different than your own

Drawing near:

When we draw near to God, bringing our own unique offering, we will be able to receive the gift of the unique offering of an other

Home is....ever-expanding

For the sin of acting out racism by _____, I bring you my offering of _____:

For acting out racism by accidentally putting my black students on the spot in a way that highlighted their race, for not carefully planning the activity and landing all of us in a situation that emphasized how minority students of color at the school were struggling...I offer my capability to remember this incident and try to prevent its re-occurrence. I offer my intention to learn from opportunities where my racism is revealed and work to undo racist tendencies I've learned simply by being a white woman in America

When do I know I am doing holy work?

When I am going into the holiest place on behalf of the entire community

I can dwell with God in sacred space and sacred community when that community prioritizes racial justice and ending oppression of all kinds

To me holiness is the act of shedding unneeded layers

God called out to you saying...

"Aspire to be a people that enables each other to be present in my (God's) holy space. Create no artificial boundary to keep one out. For I am holy."

Holy space must be...
Able to move and develop
Something that draws from a range of skills, outlooks, and orientations

When I think of purity and impurity...
I am forced to confront a tradition that values uniformity, order, and control when, in fact, the work of combating racism and working for justice necessitates engaging with chaos and messiness that comes with diversity

What will you bring as an offering to create a more tolerant world?
I will bring courage to acknowledge my failures, and the skill to rectify them with the help of others

VaYikra: I seek atonement for these sins and the ways I have perpetuated unconscious racism, not sitting near a male person of color on the subway even though there was a free seat

A holy vessel looks like...
All of us leaning in and taking responsibility
Abundance of time and compassion
The desire, first and foremost, to ensure that no one is getting hurt by the vessel
Something that is not constructed with blood

Drawing close means...
Everyone has access to the Divine
I can offer...
Compassionate leadership

I feel called...
To be an ally to people of color and integrate racial justice Torah into my rabbinate

I have sinned by...
Distancing myself
Claiming others are doing the work I do not need to do
Ignoring people in the communities I live and work in

I will atone by...
Hearing stories
Inviting others in
Having the hard conversations