

Torah of Race: 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

[In the beginning I was punished for speaking Yiddish in public]