

Race, Racism and Kolot Chayeinu
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5773: 8:30 service
Rabbi Ellen Lippmann and Ernst Mohamed

ELLEN: Picture this: It was the second day of the Undoing Racism training by the Peoples' Institute for Survival and Beyond. Ordinary conference room, 40 or so people from all around the country, many from religious communities, some from education or social services. We had met and begun our exploration the day before, greeting each other nervously, unsure of how this possibly risky venture might play out. I was glad to be with other Kolot folks there.

Our marvelous trainer Barbara Major had asked us for a list of the systems that are so often arrayed in unequal, disproportionate ways against people of color. Repeat them after me:

- Education
- Social services
- Banking
- Food access
- The justice system
- Prisons

And more. She had drawn it out on a flip chart, linking these systems as toes of a big foot that stands on the neck of every person of color in America, pushing back aspirations, hopes and dreams.

And then it got real in the room. A Latina woman from a school in the Bronx, asked to reflect, broke into tears, saying, "It's so hard. Now I know why it is so hard, every day, all my life. It is so hard." We all — white people and people of color alike — stopped to listen, really listen, and take in her reality, the reality of living all your life with a big foot on your neck.

ERNST: I am from Aruba, a small, Dutch island in the Caribbean, and I grew up in Barbados, at that time, part of the British empire. I did not feel any overt racism until I was drafted into the United States Army, in 1967. The first and only time I was called "nigger," I didn't know what to do. We were told to stand in a formation that required us to touch each other's shoulder. When I touched the man to my right, he said, "Get your hand off of me, nigger." Nothing in my background had prepared me for this. But the look in his eyes was the look that you get when you step into a pile of dog shit. I hit him — I almost broke his jaw. My company commander called me in and explained that I was in the south and it was likely to happen again and again, and that I would have to have to find a different way of dealing with it.

What I decided then was that white people can say anything to or about me, but they cannot touch me.

Since then, it's been more subtle. Walking into a store with Lisa, my wife, who is white, and salespeople surrounding me — not her — asking if I need help. My answer is, "Do I look like I need help?" I've seen women on the street clutch at their pocketbooks as I've walked toward them. Once, at a wedding reception in Boston where I was part of the wedding party, a guest asked me to get more chairs for his table. I responded, "I didn't realize it is customary for guests to get chairs for other guests."

A good friend, American and also a person of color, told me that I'm not really black, because I wasn't born here. I realized that in the eyes of a racist person my skin color is all that matters. Taken one event at a time, in isolation, maybe these aren't such big deals, at least for me. But over time, one after the other, they are that foot, exerting constant pressure.

ELLEN: I grew up in Arlington, Virginia, when the public schools were still segregated, there were separate water fountains, and I remember chain gangs.

A lot has changed. But not all. We see racial discrepancies every day: In the terrible Florida murder of Trayvon Martin or the everyday shootings of children in playgrounds in Brooklyn, in statistics about prison sentences or stop-and-frisk occurrences, in the growing inequities in the New York City schools, in our national election season.

But this is Rosh HaShanah at Kolot Chayeinu and we have to face our own truth squarely. Why are we talking about this, about race and racism, at this holy time of year, this new year, a time for Jewish gathering and Jewish reflection? What does it have to do with us here tonight?

For me, it started with the late Amina Rachman z”l whose yarzeit was yesterday. Amina, a Jew of color and a long time activist and educator, had wanted for some time to talk at Kolot about issues of race and racism. When we began with some open conversations in her memory last fall, it turned out we had lots of intertwined constituencies: people of color who were spouses of white Jews or parents of Jewish kids or white Jews who were parents of kids of color or people of color who were in process of converting to Judaism and some people of color who just liked Kolot even if they were not Jewish.

After a couple of hard conversations that did not have enough structure or guidelines, we followed Kolot president Cindy Greenberg’s wise advice and formed a task force to continue the conversations and plan strategy for Kolot: 10 Kolot-niks, 5 people of color, 4 white, and me, coming together monthly to talk it out.

At first, we got to know each other, introducing ourselves via our race, ethnic background, current lives, and connections to Kolot. Then, with some overlap, we were 3 Puerto Ricans, 2 African-Americans, 1 African-Caribbean, 3 men, 7 women, and 4 white Ashkenazi Jews. Here is how it sounded when we identified ourselves going around the circle: Woman, Lesbian, Puerto Rican, white-skinned, mother, parent, white, Jewish, woman, straight, Puerto Rican father of two beautiful daughters being raised Jewish by their beautiful Jewish mom; queer, Black, Jewish woman, Afro-Latina, raised catholic but didn’t connect religiously, spirituality always important; Jew-ish, educator, white mom to 4 children of color.

Some were White and Jewish, with the Jews identifying reluctantly as “white” but also sometimes as white identifying reluctantly as Jewish. We said that for white folks, regardless of how we feel, we are white. We said that being a person of color at Kolot is to be an insider/outsider. We wondered how to get some historical perspective and talked of how questions of class fit in.

We pretty quickly got to big personal questions: What did this mean for us as Jews? How did the people of color see issues the same or differently? And what was it like for everyone at Kolot, where it turned out it made a difference if someone was a person of color or even just not Jewish.

We used different modes of exploration brought by different members of the task force.

Those conversations led us to think about questions like, “How is Kolot racist?”

Yesterday I heard a story: A relative of a Kolot member was here when Amina was reading Torah or leading prayers. This person asked, “How can she read Hebrew? She’s Black.”

ERNST: Once, even here at Kolot Chayeinu, during a communal meal, someone asked Lisa when she had adopted Sierra, our daughter, who at the time, was four years old. At the Undoing Racism workshop that

Ellen mentioned, the participants used a grid to help organizations grade themselves on a 1-5 scale, based on their policies and practices. I wasn't there, but I understand that some people from Kolot expected the community to score on the higher side. Actually, we scored a 2.5, most lacking in our anti-racist work as reflected in key representation and in our "written" policies – not to be confused with regular interpersonal practices.

ELLEN: How do we see ourselves as a mostly white and Ashkenazi congregation? We white people at Kolot may feel like "we are fine" and do not examine more when we really should. We do not think about our language or comments. Many Kolot members would be surprised to think of Kolot as racist, so how, the task force has wondered, can we say it so that it can be heard?

The Jewish tradition of dialogue and argument, of difficult conversations, should be helpful here. In our conversations we noted that Jews are the buffer class, sometimes also called gate-keepers. We get grief from both sides. The relationship between Jews and Blacks especially in New York is noteworthy, people reminded us. There are assumptions on all sides, and class issues to deal with: we often see "rich Jews" and "poor people of color." We Jews, white or Jews of color, have our own history as oppressed people and our own issues that can make us a little defensive. But task force members reminded us all that we can "have both appendicitis and a cold" – We have inherited strong racism as whites and maybe less strong as Jews.

Finally, our task force began to come to consensus:
We agreed that our goal is: Address the issue of racism.

We agreed that our main objective is: Actively engage Kolot members on the issue of racism in order that all members of our community feel welcome AND in order to fulfill Kolot's mission "to pursue justice and refuse to be satisfied with the world as it is."

And we began to strategize: We would write a letter introducing the task force, which we did. We learned that a place where some Kolot members felt uncomfortable was at the door of the shul: Greeters did not apparently greet everyone equally. Wow! I wrote a letter to all our wonderful, volunteer shamuses and said that it did not matter what they might think, but that the job had to be to greet everyone who arrived with equal warmth and a smiling "Shabbat shalom." They have happily stepped up to the challenge.

We wanted to speak to the board of Kolot and to the Congregational Meeting, and did both. And because many of the group had taken the Undoing Racism training, we wanted as many as possible of our group to take it, to establish a foundation of similar understanding and knowledge. We still hope to invite here Jews of Color or some similar group and to visit a synagogue of Jews of color.

That is partly why I am talking about race at Kolot on Rosh HaShanah: It is part of the task force's hope to begin lots of conversations around Kolot about these issues.

But more: For all of us sitting here tonight these issues – race, and racism — matter to us as Jews in a Jewish congregation that says it is building a progressive Jewish community in Brooklyn.

Race matters because our congregation could be responding to the issues in Brooklyn or the world that turn on questions of race

Race matters because Kolot Chayeinu increasingly comprises people of color, adults and children. No surprise. In the recently released Jewish Community Study of New York, the researchers found that in 8

counties — New York City and 3 counties in Long Island and Westchester — 12% of Jewish households include at least one person who is not white. 12% is no small figure; it represents 87,000 households.

Race matters because we Ashkenazic Jews forget that there are Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in Brooklyn or in the world, and rarely learn about them and their cultures, except happily in our Children's Learning Program.

Race matters because we still watch in shame when Jewish landlords abuse tenants who are people of color or Jewish store owners treat their workers, often people of color, badly, or Jewish employers forget they need to be good bosses to domestic workers, so often women of color.

Race matters because we watch to see what Israel does and will do about African refugees, or Ethiopian Jews. [An aside: The issues of Israel and Palestinians, or Jews and Muslims here and around the world, are complicated and important and related, but different.]

And race matters because of Judaism itself.

ERNST: I led our task force a few months ago in an exercise called CPR: Defining Context, Purpose, Result for our efforts. I asked everyone to write a personal CPR. For me, the Context is my relationship with Ellen, the safety of the task force, and my belief in Kolot. Those are the things that I can rely on when the work gets tough. For me, the Purpose is to **do** this work at Kolot. My children, Eric and Sierra, now 26 and 19, grew up in this community, especially Sierra, who was 2 when she and Lisa started to attend Shabbat morning services. They became b'nei mitzvah here, at services that were profoundly meaningful to them, our families – Jewish, Hindu, secular, black, white and everything imaginable. So the Result that I envision is for Kolot to continue to be a safe place for my adult children into the future.

ELLEN: My Context was: Judaism demands it. There was some nodding of heads in the room when I said it and some asking what I meant. At the time, I was thinking of the great prophets of Israel and their demands on our integrity and action, demands like that of the prophet Micah, insisting that what God wants of us is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. Later I thought about the Exodus story, the story so many Jews and African-American Christians share as a symbol for freedom from all slaveries.

Tonight I return instead to the beginning. It is said that Rosh HaShanah is the day when God created human beings:

In the beginning, after God created the heavens and the earth, made stars and planets, separated land and water, filled each with living creatures and plants, then "*VaYomer Elohim na-aseh adam b'tzalmeinu, vid'muteinu*. God said: Let us make a human in our image, after our likeness."

What does it mean that we are created in the image and likeness of a God we cannot see?

Rashi says that "in our image" means almost literally "in our form," and that "after our likeness" refers to our power to understand and discern. We are human beings who share something of the divine, and are able to understand in a way no other created beings can.

Kolot Race Task Force member Ana Bermudez asks, "If we are created in the image of God, and we all have different faces, what does it say about God?"

One answer: Torah, which is God's blueprint and creation, has 70 faces. 70 faces like us, like ours.

Another answer: Our ancestors imagined that when God said "Let us create..." that God was speaking to the angels roundabout the divine presence, the angels that served God and did God's bidding. They are usually depicted as saying no, creating a human is not a good idea! Think what havoc they can wreak!

In some versions, the angels appear as qualities we think of as human. So Hesed (Lovingkindness) says, yes, humans should be created because they will be doers of deeds of lovingkindness. Tzedek (Justice) says yes, too: people will be doers of justice. But Shalom says, no, don't create them, they will all be fighters. And Truth says, no, don't create them, because they will all be liars. What does HaKadosh Barukh Hu – the Holy Blessed One – do? Kicks truth out of heaven and down to earth.

The Baal Shem Tov said: “What?! Really?! God kicked out truth, this beautiful gem, God's signature? Truth kicked to earth, the gem wrapped in dust and no person able to lift it up?!” He understood: “People have to be able to bend to lift such a gem from the earth, and no one wants to be the one to bend. You need humility to get truth, you cannot get it with pride or haughtiness; you need to bend and dig deep, really deep to get at the truth.”

Judaism demands that we face truth head-on. And this is the season for digging deep, for bending our knees in humility, for facing what we need to face.

ERNST: I first joined the task force to defend Kolot Chayeinu, having heard that some black people felt unsafe here. But on the task force I realized that there is work to do and that it doesn't wipe out my affection for Kolot. The hard truth I have learned is that I have to stay in a state of constant discernment. White doesn't always mean racist. Black or brown doesn't mean an automatic understanding of my experience. I have to take every situation as it comes, even here, at Kolot, where we aren't necessarily free of these tensions.

ELLEN: The hard truths I have learned are: that even as a Jew I am a white person, like it or not; that Kolot is not as all-warm-welcoming as I thought or hoped; that people of color may have a different experience of Kolot than do white people; that we white people inevitably act from the place of privilege that we have inherited. We are not bigots here at Kolot, but we have been living unexamined lives. Our race task force is designed to help us all examine. Its members also hope to help Kolot become an anti-racist congregation, which might start by looking at how we do what we do, or as someone phrased it, who gets invited to the meeting before the meeting? Who is on the board? Whose priorities are put forward?

For me, it has been a wonder to sit and plan with the Race Task Force. As one member says, “As we are facing this, we are doing it together and slowly, looking at each other, finding it not as scary as we feared to say hard things. We are in it together, not leaving anyone behind, making space to disagree, but not with rancor.”

ERNST: It is easy to get defensive and many here may want to say, “I am not a racist!!! There are real racists out there!” There are. But we have to start here. It is so easy to blame others. It is much harder to look within, to bend our knees and dig for truth, as we encounter all 70 human faces and more. So we have decided to start here with our task force discussions, and now, we hope, with some gatherings in your various homes. After the service, we want those of you who would like to be part of these conversations or to host one, to come up to the bima to sign up. If you don't write on the holiday, or have to leave quickly, we will have a sign-up on line later in the fall.

ELLEN: The hardest truth to remember is that we are all created in the image of God. Look around the room: really look. Now: How do you react when you see this face (pointing at Ernst)? How do you react when you see this one (pointing at self)? We are both the divine image, but don't tell me that if you are white and you see this face (point to Ernst) coming at you down a dark street, you don't wonder what he is

up to, where your bag is, whether you should cross the street. So how can you be as welcoming to him when you see him coming into Kolot as you are to me?

This is our goal: to talk through the hardest of truths and arrive at a place where we can all see one another as created in the divine image. Then we can take it out from here: meet others, share what we are learning, use it to establish Kolot as a not just non- but anti-racist congregation, make alliances, learn how and when a sense of white privilege and an American understanding of race emerge, and more. We have to start at home.

It may be really hard. We white people have inherited a boat-load of assumptions and behaviors of that we are not even aware of. PhD student Adam Horowitz, who studies race and religion, especially among Jews, says that 80% of American Jews are Ashkenazi and only 15% are Sephardi. According to the US government over 90% of Jews here are white, but we don't feel it that way. Horowitz asks, "How much is perception?" And whose perception?

These are some of our questions as Jews, as we struggle together in this task force and beyond, trying to arrive at a place where we can move this institution along, as well as moving ourselves.

ERNST: A moment ago, Ellen asked you how you would respond if you saw this face (pointing to himself) on a dark street. I have realized that I'm dealing with a new -ism. Based on peoples' reactions to me – say in a store – my white mustache and grey hair are softening the negative impact of my dark skin. I must look less threatening because now I'm assumed to be old. The complexity of perception just doesn't end. But know that if a racist touches me, I'll still deliver the same punch as that 23-year-old Army Private.

ELLEN: For me, the Kolot race task force has given me a needed kick, in the kindest and most respectful of ways. I hope that I can return that favor and always be kind and respectful in my dealings with the task force, with Kolot members of any color, and with the people we look forward to meeting in the larger world out there, starting with the places I call "real Brooklyn."

END: It was day three of the Undoing Racism training. We had each been asked to bring an object that represented our culture and in some cases our faith. For two hours we sat enthralled as one after the other people rose to show the object they had brought and tell why it was important, where it had come from, what it represented to them. Photographs, tailor's shears, a Yiddish song, Shabbat candlesticks, a deed to family land, a children's book, a tallis, a child's toy, a hip-hop song, and more traveled around the room as we listened and laughed and cried and saw a glimpse of what was possible. Cultural sharing, they called it. God's image, I call it. What would you bring?