The New Tikkun: Race, Reckoning and Repair
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It's hard to know what was most frightening about the scene. Was it the vicious chanting of "Sieg Heil," the armed thugs marching past and calling out their sighting of the synagogue, or the flag with its twisted black cross emblazoned upon the blood red field? The Jews inside tried to continue with their prayers, an act of resistance to the fear and intimidation of the growing crowds outside. Yet they were told to leave the building by the back door to avoid confrontation, and the Torah scrolls had been removed for safekeeping from those who threatened to destroy them.

The marchers had succeeded in their goal: To remind the Jews that, no matter how well-

established, how assimilated or how seemingly secure, they would always be The Other— different, apart and alone.

And while this scene played out countless times in a Europe descending into chaos and death 80 years ago, this march happened only a few weeks ago in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Temple President observed, with chilling symmetry, that if you tinted the footage in black and white, it appeared eerily like the newsreels we've come to regard as an artifact of a horrific past. It brings to mind Faulkner's incisive quip: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

Those images from Charlottesville of a large gathering of white supremacists, neo-Nazis and an assortment of the disillusioned, the

disempowered, the ignorant and the just plain hateful, sent a chill through not only the American Jewish community, but the nation as a whole. *Could this really be happening in 2017 America?* Had we not left this recurrent nightmare of our history behind? Wasn't America the safe haven and embracing refuge upon which we had come to rely?

And as profoundly troubling as it was to even have to raise these questions, the overriding response was clarion and clear: The vast majority of our fellow citizens unequivocally decried this event and the violence it spawned, painfully aware of where this seeming aberration might lead, and reaffirming of their commitment to address,

isolate and marginalize this cancerous seed threatening our polity.

But despite the seriousness of this incident, and despite the recent, successful inroads of nativists, nationalists and traffickers in hate to positions of power and influence, the structures, institutions and statutes that secure our people are sound. We Jews no longer encounter the systematic prejudice and exclusion of even our fairly recent American history. We wield considerable influence and power as integral, accepted and invaluable citizens of this nation in the eyes and hearts of most of our fellow countrymen.

And yet…there was another insidious side to Charlottesville, one that was central to the

gathering, one for which the anti-Semitic chants and armed-threats were ancillary. For this noxious convocation happened in the South, ostensibly in response to the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee from a city park. It was designed to be an expression of pride in white culture, lamenting the loss of the Civil War and its indisputable goal: To defend slavery and its driving ideology: racism, symbolized by the other banner lofted at the march: The Confederate Flag.

And while we Jews blanch at long relegated memories of our most vulnerable moments as a beleaguered minority, Blacks in this nation continue to feel the wounds and pain of racism. It is a resilient toxin that morphed from abject slavery, through the Jim Crow strictures of

Reconstruction, to the subtler, but no less structural racism that continues to this very day.

And while the Civil Rights Era represented a significant triumph, testifying to the moral evolution of our nation, its assurances are continuously under assault by the forces of regressive nostalgia, and its achievements mask the daunting endurance of discrimination. For Jews, Charlottesville was a glimpse of what was and what must never be again. For Blacks, Charlottesville was a confirmation of what endures and what might always be.

Our nation has struggled with race since its inception, beginning with the Constitution's fractionalizing of black life, through the presidency of Barack Obama and the *blacklash* of

last year's election. But Charlottesville was a new kind of crisis point, a resurgence of historic racism refracted through the uncertainty and displacement of globalism, technology and identity politics.

As a nation, we must start by taking a step back to see the situation more incisively. We desperately need an unblinking confrontation with our past and its consequences toward greater self-awareness. Even if we or our parents were civil rights warriors in the 60s, combatants against local red-lining here in Seattle, and rightly proud of this Temple's prominent invitation to Dr. King to speak from our bima, current concerns and discussions about race are different and deeper, requiring greater honesty and humility.

And though it has become a triggering talisman of the excesses of identity politics, we must confront the true benefits and costs of the P-word: *Privilege*.

A new volume by public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson speaks directly, bluntly and critically to White America. Reading it will leave you unable to look at your lives or the life of this nation in the same way again. If we truly want to address what has been called our nation's Original Sin, we must start by confronting some stark truths about the boon gleaned by Whites simply due to the color of their skin, and the barriers raised against Blacks simply due to the color of theirs.

At this strange and strained inflection point in our national life, we Jews find ourselves in a unique position. In our history on these shores, we were deemed non-white and we have become white. It's not that our skin tone has changed, for whiteness is, in some ways, more of an ascribed status than a racial classification. But we have successfully traversed position and perception, and thus we know what it is to feel both the cudgel of bigotry and the blessings of acceptance.

Yes, melanin still matters! **We Jews were able to pass as white, often changing our names and even our appearances to meld with the WASP ideal. But our experience here and abroad testifies to a distinct, hard-earned perspective. Perhaps we and we alone can provide singular**

support, insight and example for communities of color and for our nation. Our history and the values of our faith render us uniquely sensitive and informed about both sides of the white divide.

UCLA anthropologist Karen Brodkin, in her book How Jews Became White Folks, adds an even more compelling reason for Jewish awareness, advocacy and action on race: One of the chief reasons we Jews have become White is because Blacks were so distinct from us. In essence, having an even lower, more easily identified caste made us look more acceptable by comparison to the dominant culture.

Again, we know this dynamic all too well. Our history is replete with examples from Europe in which we served as beleaguered baseline

to make Christian serfs and peasants look and feel more human.

And so, amongst the many ways that we might address this country's curse of racism, there is a significant and admittedly controversial way that we Jews can leverage our history, our experience and our ideals in the service of racial equality. It evokes both defensiveness and clarity of conscience. That response to original and ongoing racism: *Reparations to the Black community*.

Author and activist Ta Nahisi Coates came to national prominence a few years ago in his comprehensive piece on this subject in *The Atlantic*. It is a must read, for each time the topic arises in the media, or is regularly offered in

Congress at the instigation of Representative John Conyers, it is quickly dismissed as too divisive, too complicated and too indirect in its failure to link victim to victimizer.

But Coates offers a convincing analogy to a successful implementation of national reparations—one of which we Jews are acutely aware and for which the State of Israel owes its early success: German reparations after the Holocaust.

We often forget that there were similar objections to reparations after the War on both sides of the equation. Many Germans felt that they were not directly involved, and thus did not owe the Jewish people or their new nation anything. And many Jews and Israelis felt that

monetary compensation for so devastating a loss was not only insufficient, but might provide a kind of moral laundering of the German soul. In the end, German Chancellor Adenauer and Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion pushed and prodded the agreement into place.

But even more critical than the many material benefits accrued by Israel were the moral and spiritual gains gleaned. For Jews, it was an acknowledgment by the perpetrator of responsibility—both for the crimes and for the obligation to offer considerable if imperfect recompense. And for Germany, it was a critical confrontation with national culpability, a purging of a still simmering evil, and a promise toward a different path and role in the world.

I saw the current iteration of this process a few months ago, on a rabbinic trip to Germany at the invitation of the government. Beyond acknowledgement and reparation, Germany now seeks to become a potent model for good--- initiating massive humanitarian efforts on behalf of the most vulnerable, such as refugees from the Mideast and Africa, and striving to inspire the European Union and the World toward greater compassion. As echoes of fascism have percolated up from the dormant abyss in parts of Europe, and as the light of *our* nation further dims for seekers of sanctuary and freedom, the German model is as inspiring as it is imperative.

Here at home, a good first step would be merely to open up the discussion. If we can be

painfully honest, confronting our past will reveal the inequities of our present and offer hope for an enlightened future. Congress should approve John Conyers' perennial bill to begin the process, HR 40, The Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act.

We cannot allow the immensity of the task or the scope of our national shame to dissuade us from this challenge. We cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good. And it must begin somewhere, sometime. *If not now, when?*

On a local level, there are informal yet impactful ways in which we can embrace this new kind of *Tikkun Olam*—this racial reparation of the world. Michael Eric Dyson offers many suggestions: hiring more Black Americans and

paying them a bit more than we might have; offering scholarship help to Black students; and encouraging civic and religious institutions to partner with and support schools in the Black community. And in our hotbed of entrepreneurship, our successful business leaders should reach out to existing and aspiring Black business owners to advise and encourage their efforts based on our experience.

But let's make this even more concrete and accessible: I encourage all of us, for at the least the coming year, to devote a Torah-based tithe of 10% of our designated *tzedakah* to local needs in communities of color. And perhaps the most obvious but least embraced of responses: *Get to know more Black folks*—not as an obligation on a

progressive checklist, but as real people and potential friends.

I am proud that our congregational forbearers did not abandon the Capitol Hill area like so many others during the White Flight of the 1960s. And I will continue to reach out to the Black churches and leaders around us to determine how we can partner with them, support them, and most importantly, empower them to achieve success and status on their own terms. Look for these ways to help in the coming year.

What we are really talking about is something quite familiar, for it is the essence of what we are doing here today. I am proposing a national act of *teshuvah*—of a turning toward the good and the right—an awareness of the evils and privileges of

racism—a commitment to repair the damage we've inflicted—and a path toward healing the hurt we've caused by our actions and our inactions. We must do whatever it takes, if not to make our victims whole, then to at least place them on the path to wholeness.

When I was a student at UCLA in the 80s, I was involved politically in many of the movements of the moment, especially efforts to divest from South African apartheid. I often found myself working closely with the Black Student Alliance, as much a response to imminent need as to my ongoing recognition that Blacks and Jews were natural allies. However, I often came across fellow Black students who, while appreciative of

my sensitivity and efforts, were a bit resistant to my involvement.

A friend and older student, John Caldwell, was a former head of the BSA. When I asked him why my good intentions were met with some pushback, especially in light of the common experience of our two peoples, he said something that remains with me to this day: "Danny, we don't want your help. *We want your secret*—the secret of how you Jews succeeded in America despite where you came from." This insight aligns well with the highest form of *tzedakah* described by Maimonides: *Helping others to help themselves*.

We as Americans have much to do to repair the damage inflicted by centuries of slavery,

discrimination, disenfranchisement, imprisonment, theft and murder. And we as Jews have a unique role to play by our actions and by our example: To inspire the downtrodden to rise up to the deserved heights of dignity and self-sufficiency; to empower the oppressed to become the fully realized citizens our founders promised; to invest the core of our faith as Jews into the renewed soul of a healing nation. But for there to be true repair and lasting reconciliation, there must first be an honest reckoning. Ken y'hi ratzon. May this be God's will. Amen.