This summer, the Board of Temple Beth Israel signed on to the #NotFreetoDesist campaign, started by several national Jewish leaders of color, which demands accountability from Jewish institutions around the country towards addressing racism within and outside of the Jewish community. In the spirit of that campaign, the Board decided last month to make our theme for this year *teshuvah*, specifically *teshuvah* around racial injustice in our society, as our president Jeff Kirtner wrote beautifully about in this month's newsletter.

There is much discussion in our tradition about what *teshuva* is*.* According to Maimonides' laws of *teshuvah,* one must go to great lengths in order to be considered truly penitent. His description in the second chapter includes full public confession, internal remorse, a resolve to never repeat the transgression, *tzedakah*, and when faced with the same opportunity to transgress, follow-through on the resolve never to repeat the transgression.

Further, when the wrong in question is one committed against another person, none of what I previously described suffices until the penitent person has also done everything possible to make amends with the victim. As Chapter 3 of Maimonides' laws of *teshuvah* opens*:*

"*Teshuva* and Yom Kippur only atone for transgression between a person and God. . . But transgressions between one person and another, such as hurting another, or cursing another, or stealing from another, etc, those are never forgiven until [the transgressor] repays the other what is owed, and [the other] is appeased. Even if he returned the money he owed his [fellow], he must appease him and ask for forgiveness. . ."

Teshuva is clearly not something a person just does once and then checks off their to-do list, but rather an ongoing spiritual and moral commitment, a pathway that one walks, perhaps strays from, but to which one seeks always to return, possibly for a lifetime.

Teshuvah is not only an individual process, but one that spans communities and generations. Our tradition also offers a pathway to *teshuvah* for crimes committed in previous generations, and for crimes committed against what we might call the public good, whose victims cannot clearly be identified. As one very evocative passage in the Talmud, Bava Kama 94b-95a teaches:

If **one's** deceased **father left them a cow, or a garment, or any** other **specific item** he had stolen or taken as interest, **they are obligated to return** it **due to the honor of their father.**

Later on the same page, the rabbis rule that in the case of a stolen beam, which was built into the structure of a house, the sages concede that for the sake of ideal justice, the house would be torn down to return the still-existing beam, but because that would be so onerous as to discourage people from repenting, an ordinance was instituted to encourage people to be penitent: that they could repay the cost of the beam, rather than dismantle their whole home.

Even when we have inherited a home with a stolen beam, there is a pathway to *teshuvah.* And that means there is an expectation and obligation of *teshuvah.* The rabbis brilliantly understood the nuances of teshuva. On the one hand, no matter how much time passes, wrongs must be righted - we have to pay for the cost of the beam. On the other hand, a seemingly idealized version of justice - dismantling the house in order to return the beam - ultimately doesn't reflect the human condition, and it is vital to have a realistic pathway to *teshuva*.

So what does it mean for TBI to have chosen teshuvah for racial injustice as a theme for this year? And what does TBI even have to do teshuvah for?

The decision to do *teshuva* for collective racial injustice can bring up – and indeed, already has brought up – some anxiety and resistance. Why, ask some of us, should we be called to do *teshuvah* for the wrongs of slavery and Jim Crow, when our forebears were not perpetrating those wrongs? When, in fact, none of our forebears were even considered part of the "white race" in America, only 100 years ago?

And I would say the answer is found in our text that precedes slavery in the United States by fifteen hundred years: in the Talmud in Bava Kamma. We are called to do *teshuvah* because, no matter what our ancestors did or did not do, today, **we have inherited a house that was built with a stolen beam.**

I was struck by the metaphor of the inherited house. And that was before I read, this past week, this passage in Isabel Wilkerson's new work of nonfiction, *Caste: the Origin of our Discontents:*

"We in the developed world are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waves away for decades, centuries even. Many people may rightly say, '*I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked indigenous people, never owned slaves.'* And, yes. Not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now.

"And **any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands."**

Whether you prefer to describe this house we inhabit with Wilkerson's metaphor of unstable foundation, or the Talmud's metaphor of stolen construction materials, **the moral consequences are the same: we are implicated because we are here.** *Teshuvah* is incumbent not only on those who are actually guilty, not only on those who are descended from the guilty, but on all of us who are part of the system of wrong, as long as it is not righted. And I am not just talking about George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and all those who were killed before them, but about the entire societal structure that continues to deny justice to such a large portion of our society.

We all need to be walking the path of *teshuva*: each of us taking responsibility from where we sit for realizing justice, and holding ourselves and each other accountable to doing so. There is a pathway forward for racial justice. It's a difficult path, to be sure. And it's a path all of us can and must take.

Before envisioning what the path entails, I want to point out some of the most dangerous roadblacks that can detour us from the path of teshuvah.

For one, there is the urge to set others' *teshuva* as a prerequisite for our own. I get that many light-skinned Jews are resistant to supporting Black Lives Matter because of antisemitic rhetoric on the rise on the Left. And we need to be fighting antisemitism on the Left, and on the Right, and everywhere. But **black lives must matter even when a black leader says something offensive.**

Another roadblock is the temptation to blame systemic racism on a particular administration or a particular political party, or particular racist, right-wing antisemites. But, in fact, our country has been explicitly and tacitly enacting violence against people of color under every administration that has existed since its inception. It is still happening and on our watch.

Still another roadblock is “cancel culture,” which is to say, our desire and tendency to establish our innocence and signal our own virtue by dissociating ourselves from people whom we deem to have done wrong. The canceling can be something as quiet as “unfriending” someone on social media, or as public as a campaign to get someone fired. But by focusing on individual transgressors, as opposed to structures, and attempting to isolate the bad actors from the collective of “good people,” we deny our complicity, further polarize the discourse, and reject the possibility that people who have hurt others could ever do *teshuvah* and do better. It lets everybody off the hook - the innocent from complicity and the guilty from accountability. That’s why we need *teshuva* culture instead of cancel culture.

And of course, still another roadblock is blaming those who are demanding structural change for the problems. A few weeks ago, a Black Unity march came through my neighborhood late one evening. As I left my house to join them, I passed a neighbor, who had come out to the corner to raise a concern with the marchers. I heard her speaking with increasing passion, “I’m not saying don’t march! March all you want, come back in January! I get why you’re mad! I’m mad too. But you’re scaring people and if people are scared they are going to re-elect that idiot and **it will be all YOUR FAULT!”**

I resonate with this neighbor’s desire to stay in a state of innocence, where the problems facing society are because of “**those** scared people, electing **that** idiot, all **your** fault.”

I, too, fear what may happen this fall and winter, which are likely to bring greater violence, no matter who wins the elections. I have felt that desire to correct and police how others should respond to outrage and trauma, that sureness that I understand best what is required for the greater good.

But, if I commit to *teshuvah,* then I acknowledge that whatever chaos, upheaval and threats to democracy might increase in the coming months, they will not be the fault of the Black Unity organizers in Eugene. To the extent that the protest movement affects the election outcomes, it will be because of the racism of white people like me. It will be because of the violence and chaos that we have been allowing and acclimating ourselves to, all of us, for generations, since this house was built.

Returning to the Talmud teaching about stolen goods inherited from previous generations, Bava Kamma 92a also teaches how one repays a theft or a swindle of an item that no longer exists, or a debt to society at large or to a victim who can no longer be identified. When the item no longer exists, one must pay the victim money. And when a victim is no longer identifiable, one must give money for, as the gemara puts it, "cisterns, ditches and caves" to benefit the general public.

The debt is ours, collectively, to pay.

If you're feeling uncomfortable, Thank God. So am I. Discomfort is what *teshuvah* and Yom Kippur require of us. And thankfully, they give us the opportunity to atone and be forgiven and try anew. They relieve us of the burden to pretend that we do everything right, that we have it all together.

****

Before singing Kol Nidre this evening, I chanted an ancient liturgical invocation including the line "anu matirin l'hipalel im ha'avaryanim." "With the consent of the Almighty, and consent of this congregation, in a convocation of the heavenly court, and a convocation of the lower court, we are hereby granted permission to pray with transgressors."

This statement appears in our liturgy because of the principle in Jewish law that people who transgress Torah laws and are subject to excommunication cannot be included in a minyan. But what is the point of a day of repentance, of atonement if people who have transgressed have no way to join the community? What is the purpose of a day of atonement, if only those who are already behaving well get to participate?

And so our sages come up with this liturgical workaround, invoking permission from both heaven and earth, to acknowledge that there can be no real atonement unless those in our community who have transgressed have a way in. On this day, even "those people" are welcome.

At that point in the liturgy, the hypothetical sinners are still in the third person, an imagined "they" whom "we" presumably righteous people make room to join us.

But we don't stay on our high horse. By the time we get to our confessions, we will say them in the first person plural, over and over: "ashamnu, bagadnu. . ." "al chet shechatanu. . . " "for the wrong *we* have done before you."

It takes us only a few hours liturgically to move from the posture of "we can't pray with people who have done wrong!" to "Well, today we can pray with people who have done wrong," to "actually, we acknowledge we have all done wrong."

Let us acknowledge we have done wrong, and the work of *teshuva* is ours to do. Let us step forward on the path of *teshuva* together.

There are many ways to show up. Not everyone can or should take to the streets, especially during COVID. Each of us have gifts and passions that are needed. If you can't leave your house, but you love to cook, make food for the activists. There's money that needs to be donated to bail funds, local and state solidarity groups, there are letters that need to be written, there are phone calls that need to be made.

And yes, there's books to be read and learning to be done, but be wary of mistaking personal learning for *walking* down the path of teshuvah.

As we embrace this work we will not always say or do the right thing, and that can be so scary that it deters us from trying - but the test isn't getting it right all the time; it's staying on the path even when we need to accept correction for doing something wrong. If the standard were perfect antiracism work – or any kind of perfect work – all the time, it would, also let us off the hook. We would all fail, and shouldn't even bother trying. But the standard is moving forward on the path of *teshuva:* we get to support each other as we strive to show up, mess up, learn lessons and show up more. We get to feel joy in the learning and the movement.

As a synagogue community, we are very early in this process of *teshuvah*. We have made a commitment to showing up, and the board is only beginning to figure out what that actually looks like. If you have input and would like to be involved in this work, please reach out to Geraldine Moreno-Black, the board liaison for #NotFreetoDesist.

We all have different strengths, abilities and talents that we can joyfully bring. We all can commit something to the work of. It's on us to decide where we can act, not allowing what we can't do or don't agree with to block out what we can.

I know we are tired. I know we are overwhelmed. But we are in this together. No-one can do everything, but no-one is called to do everything. We are each called to discern how to stretch ourselves to show up to meet the truth of this moment.

It is a lifelong journey, but one that makes us and our whole house stronger. I know we can each bring something. Let's walk this path together.