

Yom Kippur Day September 28, 2020 10 Tishrei 5781

Musaf Service can be viewed from Adath Jeshurun Website at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r75eFFAkkbg&feature=youtu.be>

Adath Jeshurun Congregation, Minnetonka, MN

*Rabbi Harold J. Kravitz*

## **Antiracism 146:28**

### **Introduction to Sermon**

Before I give my sermon, I want us to view a five-minute video presentation created by Minnesota photographer John Noltner. Noltner is behind a mixed media project called “A Peace of My Mind” (peace as in Shalom). “A Peace of My Mind” is an initiative committed to “building community and bridging divides through portraits and personal stories.” It started as a collection of photos he created of Minnesotans devoted to pursuing peace that he first published as a book. You may have seen those portraits a few years ago hanging on the walls of Bacio’s restaurant at Ridgedale in Minnetonka.

The slides and quotes you are about to see are from John Noltner’s “A Peace of My Mind” website from time he spent this summer at 38<sup>th</sup> and Chicago in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder. As you watch it, I ask that you really concentrate on the faces and the words expressed by the people he depicts. It may stir up strong feelings in you. We may not agree with everything said, but I hope we can look into the eyes of our neighbors in Minneapolis to listen and empathize before jumping to judgment. I share it today because I think it will help us as we do our individual and collective *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, our personal and communal stock taking and soul searching on this sacred Yom Kippur. <https://apomm.net/2020/06/11/george-floyd/>

### **Sermon**

By last May it seemed that we were doing pretty well in MN addressing COVID-19 and that we could get through this crisis. And then we were forced to

face another crisis for which we also had not prepared adequately – we were forced to confront the crisis of systemic racism. On Monday of Memorial Day weekend, Minneapolis became the focus of the world’s attention because of the horrendous events that unfolded with the murder of George Floyd z’l. It is astonishing that what took place in MN on May 25 has reverberated around the world and is still being felt and invoked. The image of a Minneapolis police officer’s knee on George Floyd’s neck, as he begged to be allowed to breathe over the course of eight minutes and 46 seconds, has been seared into people’s hearts and minds.

Gathering digitally this Yom Kippur has allowed us to try to further grasp those events from photos and quotes assembled by MN photographer John Noltner. I know they were hard to watch and may have stirred up all kinds of thoughts and feelings. Thank you for opening yourself to them.

While we should have been shocked by what occurred in MN this summer, we should not have been surprised. The disproportionate killing of black men and women by police in the United States is not new. Black people are shot and killed by police, in this country, at twice the rate of white people. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2020/07/16/the-research-is-clear-white-people-are-not-more-likely-than-black-people-to-be-killed-by-police/>

The issues of racism in this country and in our state are not new. We have known for years about troubling racial disparities in areas of education, housing, employment and health care. The tensions created by such disparities no doubt contributed to the eruption we witnessed, resulting in devastating damage in our Twin Cities, as it did for similar reasons elsewhere.

You may not recall, but five years ago, on Yom Kippur day, I gave a sermon about racism. I spoke about hearing Ken Burns, the great American documentary filmmaker, deliver the commencement speech at my daughter Elana’s graduation from Washington University in St Louis. Burns based his speech on one delivered just up the road in Springfield, Illinois by a 29-year-old, tall and lanky lawyer, who would one day become President of the United States- Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln, in addressing the issue of national security, asserted that it was not some foreign threat we most needed to fear. He said that, “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.” Burns pointed to the city of Ferguson, not that far from the Wash U campus, which had only months before experienced rioting after the fatal shooting by police of Michael Brown. Burns observed that, “the shame Lincoln thought would lead to national suicide, our inability to see beyond the color of someone’s skin. It has been with us since our founding.”

In my sermon that Yom Kippur, I asked that we do *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, soul searching in response to the challenging questions posed by Ken Burns that summer at Wash U:

“What is our responsibility?

How do we make sure that racism finally ends in this country?”

My Yom Kippur sermon then introduced our adult learning series for spring of 2016, which we called “Facing Racism.” Each year at Adath we offer a series under the title “Jewish Studies for a Better World” to explore a significant timely issue through the lens of Jewish teaching that should lead us take action. Our goal is in keeping with Rabbi Shimon’s teaching in Pirkei Avot (1:17) “It is not the study that is the essence, *לֹא הַמְדִּירָשׁ הוּא הָעֵקֶר*, but the action *אֲלֵא הַמַּעֲשֵׂה* .”

It was crystal clear to our series’ planners that year that we had no choice but to examine issues of racism in MN and to find ways to address them. We knew then, and it is still the case, that Minnesota leads our nation in racial disparities. Sadly, the economic gulf between black and white families remains higher in Minnesota than nearly anywhere else in the country. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/30/minneapolis-racial-inequality/> .

Feeling we had only touched the surface in our 2016 series, we followed up in our Jewish Studies series the next year by digging even deeper into the issue of racism, looking at how it was rampant in our criminal justice system. We hoped to spur our people to action after learning about the injustice of mass incarceration in this country, as exposed by Michelle Alexander in her groundbreaking book

*The New Jim Crow*, which is still well worth reading.

When so much violence broke out in MN this summer, I was left to reflect on the question- What did we really accomplish with our previous efforts? We took some steps, but I am still left to wonder why did we not make more progress in moving our congregation to act against racism? I had to do my own soul searching as I reacted strongly to seeing our beautiful Twin Cities in shambles. We took the unprecedented step that weekend of removing our *Sifrei Torah* from the ark to safety. How shocking! Just as I was revolted by the murder of George Floyd, I was also deeply disturbed by the destruction that ensued here and elsewhere. It became my responsibility as a rabbi to call Adath congregants who painfully endured the looting of their businesses that long served their neighborhoods. In retrospect, I appreciate that my wife Cindy pushed me hard to try to listen and understand the angry outburst in the streets, rather than move so quickly to a place of judgement. It helped me to look at what had happened through the lens of Mussar practice, and my particular need to maintain curiosity and empathy before making judgements.

In that spirit I was moved when I came across a powerful speech of Martin Luther King, Jr delivered in the mid-1960s after summer riots in Watts, Detroit, Philadelphia and Minneapolis, entitled, "The Other America." After rejecting violence as a solution, the Rev. King stated:

*...in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. [repeat] And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again.*

While subsequent investigation in Minnesota, and elsewhere, show that anarchists and white supremacists took advantage of the situation to set fires and stir chaos, it does not change my mind to the relevance of Dr. King's statement in describing the roots of the unrest we witnessed. It seems that our country is not listening any better in 2020 to what King called "the language of the unheard" than we did in 1965. We are left, yet again, to do *cheshbon ha-nefesh*- serious soul searching, as is appropriate to this season, to answer the questions:

"What is our responsibility?"

How do we make sure that racism finally ends in this country?"

I am plagued by the question: What can I, what can we, do differently so that five years from now we will not look back and see that have not made adequate progress in doing what we can individually and collectively to end racism?

In response to the events that have shaken the world emanating from 38<sup>th</sup> and Chicago in Minneapolis, we have established an Antiracism Committee at Adath to help us do better this time around. I invite you to take a close look at the recently created website page laying out the mission of that committee. <https://www.adathjeshurun.org/antiracism.html>

You may wonder why in naming it we used the word antiracism? When we talk about racism our tendency is to look to the hatred of the KKK or the alt-right, which pose genuine threats. Studies of domestic terror by the Department of Homeland Security from this August, still awaiting publication, support the assessment that white supremacists present the gravest terror threat to this country. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/04/white-supremacists-terror-threat-dhs-409236>

In focusing on this real threat, we often close our eyes to the ways in which racism permeates our society and we ourselves contribute to it. In just one of many possible examples, we see during this pandemic that African-American deaths from COVID-19 in this country are nearly two times greater than would be expected based on their share of the population, and in some states the rate is as much as three or more times greater. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state>

A short answer to why we call it Adath's Antiracism Committee is to communicate that if we do not take the steps necessary to end racism, in all its forms, then we are contributing to it. This very much aligns with the spirit of the Talmudic passage I referenced when introducing Musaf that if we do not object to transgressions of our household, or of our town, or of the world, we are held responsible. (BT Shabbat 54b).

I invite you to look at our Adath Antiracism Committee webpage. The resources the committee have assembled can help us better understand what it means when we speak about systemic racism. Two books mentioned there have especially influenced my thinking. The first I found very powerful is *Caste: The Origin of our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson's newly published study of racism. It has received wide acclaim, the review of it in the NY Times called it, "an Instant American Classic About Our Abiding Sin,"

Wilkerson is a brilliant writer who reframes our thinking about the persistent oppression of black people going back to the origins of our country. She builds on observations of earlier scholars who asserted that the caste system in India can provide valuable insight to our understanding of racism in America. She documents effectively how such discrimination continues to resist attempts to end it even after the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, which we would like to think closed that chapter for this country. As a Jewish reader, I especially appreciate that Wilkerson looks at the way Nazi Germany treated Jews as a caste, to be despised and even destroyed. I was astonished to learn from her that in formulating the infamous Nuremberg Laws Nazi leaders drew upon Jim Crow law of the United States, depriving black people of their rights, to determine how best to separate European Jewry from the rest of society.

A less well-known book I highly recommend is by American Jewish historian Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity*, (Princeton U Press, 2006). Goldstein documents the ways Jews have struggled with issues of race in America going back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Jews we have often found ourselves caught within the constraints of long existing

boundaries in this country between white and black people. As Jews we have, more often than not, benefited by being defined as largely white and have enjoyed privileges because the majority of us, though surely not all of us, are perceived as white. I invite you to join our Downtown Study Group where we will read this book starting in late October. The events around George Floyd's murder have forced me to confront my own blind spots and bias, immersing myself in learning to grapple with how I and how we contribute to systemic racism.

As Jews we start with study, which is valuable, but we cannot end there. We need to wrestle down the consequences of what we learn. We have an opportunity to start to do so this afternoon with our Yom Kippur Forum that will broadcast early this evening at about 5:10 pm, after *minha* and before *neilah*, during which we will address the question of synagogue security and antiracism. If we had been in our building today, we would have been protected by armed guards. We have long had such security on High Holiday and since the murderous attack, by a white supremacist, on the Etz Chayim synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018 we have sadly felt the need for such security on Shabbat, and at other times we gather.

Many of us feel safer seeing that police presence at synagogue. How much thought have you given to how Adath members who are Jews of color, black Jews or guests who are black or people of color, feel when they see an armed police person at our door? Listening to the hurt felt by people of color, about whom we care, led us to focus on this issue of Security and Antiracism. We invite you to watch the Yom Kippur forum today at 5:10 pm when we will explore this complex issue. We must make the effort to learn before we take action, but once we open our eyes to the issues of racial inequality and injustice that permeate our society, and from which our synagogue is not immune, we need to begin to take thoughtful action individually and collectively.

It is not easy to confront these issues in ourselves and in our own community. That is why in Judaism we not only practice *cheshbon ha-nefesh* each day, as assisted by Jewish practices such as those taught in the Mussar tradition. We also observe this season of atonement together so we can support each other in doing this hard work. That work begins by listening and learning and seeing the pain that other human beings, created in the image of God, are experiencing as we saw in the opening video, as hard as it is to watch. But it is the work we must do.

As Rabbi Tarfon taught in *Pirkei Avot* 2:21 “You are not expected to finish the work , לא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמֵּר , but neither are you at liberty to neglect it בְּן וְלֹא אֲתָה בֶן לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה.”

Let us respond to the challenge of the beautiful prayer I read earlier by Cantor Rachel Stock Spilker and her sisters introducing *Aleinu* a central prayer of the High Holiday Musaf, which concludes our prayer services every day.

We say *Aleinu*- it is on us. We must take responsibility. I am grateful that Adath's Antiracism Committee will work thoughtfully to support us in doing that work. Five years from now I pray we can look back on this summer as a turning point and we can truly recite the words *Aleinu*, it is on us, knowing that we have lived up to our responsibilities, both individually and collectively.

## **Introductions to Yom Kippur Musaf**

Introduction Musaf Amidah, *Machzor Lev Shalem*, p. 300 8:50

Anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's household and does not, is punished for the actions of the members of the household; anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's townspeople and does not, is punished for the transgressions of the townspeople; anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not is punished for the transgressions of the entire world.                      Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54b

This is a fascinating teaching that highlights our responsibilities and our obligations to correct wrongdoing. As we recite the Musaf Amidah, I ask you to consider the issues of taking responsibility as this Talmudic teaching challenges us to do.

Introduction to *Aleinu HaGadol*. *Machzor Lev Shalem*, p. 325 50:34

We turn to the *Aleinu HaGadol* in which the Hazzan bows done in contrition. *Aleinu* are also the words we use to conclude our prayer services each day. In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder Cantor Rachel Stock Spilker and her sisters Hollis Schachner and Sara Stock Mayo penned a liturgical reading for Shavuot that

I found incredibly powerful and used in our Zoom services. I ask that as we reflect on Hazzan recitation in what is probably the original context of *Aleinu* in the High Holiday liturgy section of Musaf we acknowledge God's sovereignty while also acknowledging that we are created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

*Aleinu*. It is on us.

To bow in praise before God  
as a sign of reverence  
and perhaps submission  
It is on us to bend our knees  
only in reverence for life  
and only for submission to that which is good

*Aleinu*. It is on us.

Our sages teach that the angels have no knees  
Their legs do not bend  
They do not need knees  
because their entire purpose  
is to stand tall before God in service  
But we are not these kinds of angels  
We bend under the weight on our shoulders,  
We let this twisted world twist us,  
into knowing that our service to God comes,  
not only in the form of thoughts and prayers,  
but in the form of action



*Aleinu.* It is on us.

*Va'anachu kor'im.* We bend at the knee

*Umishtachavim.* We bow at the waist

*Lifnei Melech Malchei HaMalchim.* We stand straight before God

*HaKadosh Baruch Hu.* We who are made in God's image  
must be holy because God is holy

So we rise

To repair this very broken world

We stand straight because we can

We stand up because we must

*Aleinu.* It is on us.

We bend our knees before the God of love

In devotion and in disruption

In protest and in praise

From shame to *shleimut* – wholeness

We rise before the God of truth

to march and to move

to bend this broken arc towards justice

*Aleinu.* It is on us.

Bent knees are for showing reverence

to prostrate in peaceful protest  
to prepare us for moving  
to prepare us for marching  
Bent knees are not for killing  
God did not make knees, or any other part of us, for that

*Aleinu*. It is on us.

— Hollis Schachner, Sara Stock Mayo, and Rachel Stock Spilker

<https://tcjewfolk.com/aleinu-it-is-on-us/>

Introduction to *Vidui*. *Machzor Lev Shalem*, p.347 1:08:53

As we are in the *Vidui* section of our Yom Kippur *Musaf* service the prayers of confession, on this past month of Elul leading up to the High Holidays. We invited our congregation to prepare for the holidays in a six-session program run by the Center for Contemporary Mussar. headed by my teacher Rabbi Ira Stone. It was a powerful introduction to Mussar practice and provided an opportunity to reflect on the powerful reflection on the *U'netanah Tokef* prayer that is a core prayer of the High Holiday Musaf Amidah.

As we get to the *Vidui* confessional prayer I am still thinking about a comment offered by Rabbi Stone in the last session of the series in which he spoke about *Vidui*, the confessional we are about to recite that is recited in the plural. Of course reciting them is a reminder of the sins we might need to atone for as individuals. We normally speak of the fact that the *Al Chet* are mentioned in the plural as reminding us that we are in this together. Rabbi Stone added an important insight in his comment on *vidui* that the *Al Chet* passages are in the plural to remind us that each of us has to take responsibility for all of us. As we think about the transgressions of our times, let us think about what we ourselves could have to stand up to in order to repair them.

This connects to the story I told last week “We are all in the same boat.” That story is linked to the concept with which you may be familiar *Kol Yisrael Aravim zeh bazeh*. Every member of the people of Israel is reasonable one for the other.

That statement is often understood as meaning that we have to help each other out and we do. But in its original context it supports Rabbi Stone’s teaching that we are each obligated for the misdeeds of all of us. It is a daunting challenge, but as we recite *Vidui*- the confessional let us think about where we can start that work.

Introduction to the *Al Chet* 1:15:00 *Machzor Lev Shalem*, p. 351 1:14:59

A Communal “*Al Chet*” For the Sins of Racism

By Yavilah McCoy, 2016 [https://www.truah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Al\\_Chets\\_for\\_Racism\\_Yavilah\\_McCoy.pdf](https://www.truah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Al_Chets_for_Racism_Yavilah_McCoy.pdf)

Abridged and adapted for Yom Kippur Musaf Adath Jeshurun Congregation, Minnetonka, MN 9-27-20 1:15:00

As we turn to page 352 for the recitation of *Al Chet*, the communal taking of responsibility for our sins we turn to a version of the *Al Chet* written by Yavilah McCoy which asks to do *cheshbon hanefesh* to do soulsearching about racism.

I have adapted it:

For the sins we have committed through conscious and unconscious racial bias.

For the sins we have committed through hardening our hearts to the need for change.

For the sins of colluding with racism both openly and secretly.

For the sins we have committed through uttering racist words.

For the sins we have committed through the denial of *tzelem elohim* (the divine spark) in God’s creation.

For the sins we have committed in deceiving others by not teaching our children the worth and value of Black people.

For the sins we have committed in exploiting Black people and Black bodies.

For the sins we have committed in not caring for the ways that race and class intersect in our efforts to welcome people in our Jewish spaces.

For all these, we seek pardon, forgiveness and atonement

For the sins we have committed through confessing our commitments to ending racism insincerely.

For the sins we have committed that desecrate the divine name by allowing White Supremacy to shape us.

For the sins of racism that we have committed knowingly and unknowingly that continue to do damage.

For the sins of racism we have committed through engaging in foolish racist talk and gossip.

For the sins of racism we have committed through passing judgement.

For the sins of racism that we have committed through baseless hatred.

For the sins that we have committed through turning a blind-eye to pain and suffering around us.

For the sins of racism that we have committed by not seeing racism as an evil among us.

For the sins of racism that we have committed by not committing to end it.

For all these, we seek pardon, forgiveness, and atonement