



Heschel King Forum—Black Jewish Justice Alliance 11.3.19
Keynote Address & Dialogue with Rev. James Lawson

I want to tell you a story.

I have a friend, a member of our community, a mother of four beautiful little children. She was suffering last year from a terrible, inexplicable abdominal pain. For months, she tried to ignore it; she's one of those women who can endure anything, without even a complaint. But every day it grew worse until she could barely stand it. Eventually, she dragged herself to the doctor, who took one look at her and rushed her to the emergency room.

In the ER they discovered that the real problem had nothing to do with her abdomen. She had a tumor, wrapped around her spine. Nobody had ever seen anything like it. They rushed her into surgery and through a combination of medical ingenuity and God's grace, my friend's life was saved.

And about that pain? They never figured out exactly what it was. They wouldn't say it was unrelated, but they were clear that the thing that was hurting her was not the thing that nearly killed her. Instead, that pain awakened her to the cancerous growth that could and would have taken her life had it not been treated.

There is a great pain plaguing America today. With every lie, every bit of racist incitement, every antisemitic canard tweeted from the highest offices in the land, we are nearly brought to our knees with the shock and pain.

But that pain is not what's killing us.

Rambam, Maimonides—who was both a Torah scholar and a medical doctor—teaches that before treating an illness, we first need to be really careful to establish the proper diagnosis. Some illnesses require nothing more than a few days of rest, while others require invasive treatments and dangerous, sometimes even life-threatening surgeries.

This is also the case, he teaches, with a spiritual sickness. It's only when we take the time to properly diagnose what's ailing the body and soul that we have a chance at healing. That's true for each of us individually, and it's true for us collectively, as a nation.

So let's be honest about what we see when we examine the body of our nation today. Yes, there is a great, awful pain in the gut. It is the pain of polarization and division, the ache of cruelty and incivility. It is the pain of willful lies and reckless endangerment of democratic norms. It is the pain of needless and ceaseless affront to everything we know to be just and right. It is the pain that led my husband and me to sit down the morning after the election and say to our children:

“You must remember: bullies and cheaters and liars may win in the short term, but they do NOT, in the end, win. From this point forward, we must turn this house into an oasis of peace and justice. As the world gets more hateful, more dishonest, more dangerous, we must be even better versions of

ourselves. More patient. More compassionate. More loving. Because in the long run, it is only love that wins.”

The pain is real. But those most flagrant symptoms are only a hint of what actually threatens our lives, our democracy and the planet. It’s important that we understand that, because at some point the pain in the gut will go away (whether by impeachment or election). And when it does, we’ll breathe a sigh of relief. We’ll be more than ready to go back to business as usual. But our problems will not be solved, unless and until we route out the real sickness in the body, which is not only at the top, but permeates all parts of our collective system.

The body of our country is on the examination table, and when we really look, we see that a cancer has wrapped itself around the spine of the nation. It is the cancer of white supremacy, a disease that has festered and metastasized at the heart of our nation from its founding. It has demonized, dehumanized, demoralized and disenfranchised millions of people over hundreds of years. Its toxicity knows no bounds.

And, most egregiously, the cancer of white supremacy has triumphed under the banner of religion.

Today in Washington, DC, you can see a “Slave Bible” on display in the Museum of the Bible. It was published in 1807, designed for use in worship by enslaved people in the British West-Indies. The Slave Bible was edited by slaveholders to exclude any reference to the Exodus from Egypt, which the slaveholders knew might incite rebellion. Imagine a Bible with no Pharaoh, no Moses, no burning bush, no Sinai.

From the beginning, religion was used to justify slavery, which was described as an institution of God, a part of the natural order of the universe. Preachers spoke on Sunday mornings of the theological underpinnings of slavery, arguing that enslaved people were inferior beings, not fully human, who would be worse off without the institution of slavery to both discipline and feed them.

Religious leaders and religious thought played a significant role not only in the justification of slavery and racial segregation, but in the reign of racial terror that followed Reconstruction and led to the Civil Rights Movement. While there were many cases in which ministers risked their lives to support the anti-lynching movement, there are also many cases in which justification for lynching came directly from church leaders themselves.

Ta Nehisi Coates points out that “in his famous “Segregation Now” speech, George Wallace invokes God nearly thirty times, and calls the federal government opposing him ‘a system that is the very opposite of Christ.’”

Unfortunately, the same white supremacist theology is alive and well today. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a pastor from North Carolina, argues that “slaveholder religion would like [us] to stay focused on personal piety and compassion ministries—to not be ‘too political,’” something I hear all too often from my own colleagues in the rabbinate. Wilson-Hartgrove identifies “the silence of white moderates as a vestige of slaveholder religion.” And *that* is a sin perpetrated not only by many in the church, but also by many in the synagogue too. Our religious institutions have become shields defending the indefensible.

Today, we see faith leaders not only giddily lining up to lay hands on a person who engages in decidedly irreligious personal behavior (bragging about sexual assault, paying off adult film stars, not paying their

contracted workers, lying, cheating, stealing...), but also working overtime to bring harm upon the least of these—the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

America today is drowning in bad religion.

And bad religion fuels and is fueled by the cancer of white supremacy, now again erupting in the public square.

Over the past three years, there has been a significant rise in hate crimes related to race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality, much of which can be attributed to this resurgent white supremacist movement. The rise in antisemitism—manifesting most terrifyingly in the massacres in Pittsburgh and Poway—corresponds to this broader trend.

All manifestations of antisemitism are dangerous, even among our allies and friends. But it's important that we're clear: the people who have engaged in murderous acts of violence against Jews in this country—and those who pose the greatest threat to our people—are all White Nationalist terrorists whose goal is nothing short of the total eradication of Jews and People of Color from America.

These White Nationalists abide a particular brand of antisemitism that was honed over centuries in Europe and has now successfully migrated to the US. This is a right-wing, nationalistic antisemitism, in which the Jews—the ultimate outsiders—conspire to commit a “white genocide” by undermining systems of white power through funding and supporting People of Color and movements for social change.

Over the past few years, America has turned from a place with a constant but quiet undercurrent of this antisemitic White Nationalism to a place in which antisemitism is fed, fueled, and funded from the highest offices. Conspiracy theories of Globalists manipulating the economy and cheating American workers have permeated the consciousness of a generation of angry, disaffected white men who were looking for scapegoats, and have been handed yet another one.

Here's the irony: good religion stems from precisely the same Biblical narrative that the white supremacists used to justify their bad religion. Those sections that were excised from the Slave Bible form the core narrative, the meta-narrative at the heart of our religious practice. Activists from abolitionist to civil rights leaders were often people of faith, whose belief in God and reading of the Bible compelled them to resist the norms of slaveholder religion, and affirm the sanctity of all human life and the dignity of all of God's children.

The core story of my faith is a redemption story: the Exodus from Egypt—in Hebrew *yetziat mitzrayim*—literally emergence from the narrow place. That story forms the theological, ethical and psychic foundation of the Jewish experience of the world, animating and sustaining our people for thousands of years. And it is embedded in our liturgy and our calendar to such an extreme that it's clear that it's designed to affect everything from what we eat to how we pray to our heartache when reading the newspaper each morning. And it stands at the heart of the teachings of both Dr. King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and so many others who fought for liberation and redemption, not as political objectives or philosophical abstractions, but as mandates of their faith and moral imperatives.

It is, at its heart, not a story of oppression and enslavement in Egypt—only a few verses in the first two chapters of Exodus describe the hundreds of years of debasement and dehumanization. It's also not the story of arrival in the Promised Land. As the book of Deuteronomy ends, Moses dies on top of the mountain looking out at, but never actually reaching the Land of Canaan.

Instead, this story is consumed with the dreaming of, planning for and walking toward the Promised Land. It bears testament to the inextinguishable yearning, both human and divine, for freedom. Its focus is on the tedious, protracted and unfinished process of becoming free from oppression. It is a work in progress. And it endures because the journey from degradation to dignity remains an ongoing struggle.

This story, at its heart, establishes the eternal truth of the triumph of freedom over slavery, dignity over degradation, liberation over systematized oppression. In a world of cruelty and injustice, this story is a testament to the inextinguishable yearning—human and divine—for freedom. For equity and equality. For hope in dark times, and for sacred responsibility in times of light and possibility.

This is a radical story, and it makes the religious life a perpetual, unfinished moral and spiritual revolution, a testimony to centrality of human worth and dignity in world of human cruelty and degradation, a testimony to the possibility of change in world of spiritual and political intransigence and stagnancy.

Which brings us back to today. This story is the most powerful counter-testimony to the politics of hatred that fuel the white supremacist lie that endangers our communities and sickens our nation.

Even as our communities experience profound vulnerability, it's critical that we remember that we are not alone. Good people everywhere are under attack amid the broader cultural trend of hatred and demonization of minority communities. White supremacy and extremist violence target Jews, Blacks, Muslims, Latinos, LGBTQ folks, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Attacks are not only in synagogues, but in churches, mosques, Sikh temples, schools, and Walmarts. And they are not only destroying people's lives, they are threatening to undermine our democracy and unravel the entire social fabric.

In light of this reality, we recall the Exodus narrative, and reaffirm that the only moral choice is to stand together, deepening our bonds of connectedness, and working together to overcome the hatred that weakens and ultimately endangers us all. Walking together, from darkness to light.

The only way to eradicate the cancer in the system is to route it out. As much as there is a globally networked community of hate on social media, we are called to build globally networked communities of love. We need to stand together: arm in arm, side by side, reclaiming an ethic that fights systemic oppression and treats every one of us with the love, respect, and dignity that is our birthright as children of the Holy One.