



**THE PATH TO REDEMPTION:  
A Yom Kippur Conversation with Bryan Stevenson  
and Rabbi Sharon Brous**

*It's been nearly 20 years since I first encountered a teaching from the Slonimer Rebbe, Netivot Shalom, which, if you've spent any time around me, you've heard in some iteration:*

*A person sets out to build a beautiful home, but he doesn't want to invest a lot of money and dig a foundation that is deep and solid, honest and pure. So he builds instead on a rotten foundation, leaving the building with a weak infrastructure. As a result, cracks constantly form in the walls of the house. Again and again, the owner paints over the cracks, then spackles, then plasters, but each effort only reveals new breaches, and the house is in constant danger of collapsing.*

*Eventually there is only one option: he has to find the courage to break down the entire house, to uproot what's rotten and corroded, and then dig new foundations that are deep and healthy, upon which a truly strong house can be built.*

*This is such powerful Yom Kippur torah, for in this time, our greatest challenge is to stop our feverish painting and plastering over the cracks, and instead determine what must be uprooted and cleansed for us to build a new, healthy foundation. It's true for our bayit ruhani, our spiritual home, and—I believe with all my heart—it's true for our nation.*

*In our time, we're seeing the cracks that have existed in the walls of the home open up into great, impossible to ignore breaches. We recognize today—perhaps more so than ever before—that building on a rotten foundation has left us all profoundly vulnerable, and we feel the urgency in uprooting and cleansing, before the entire house collapses.*

*This is where Bryan Stevenson comes in.*

*After many years of following Bryan's writing and work, I met him a few years ago when he came to speak with some folks in LA about his newest project, building the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. He invited me to participate in their launch the following year—where I was astonished and deeply inspired by the work he had done to create a path for truth telling, and ultimately healing for America. In November, 2019, we brought a large delegation from IKAR to Montgomery to share the experience, and it was transformative.*

*As the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama, Bryan lifted the veil on unfair sentencing, abuse of mentally ill incarcerated people, and the prosecution of children as adults. He also dedicated years to working on the exoneration of innocent death row prisoners, winning reversals on over 135 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row.*

*And he has spent decades working to open our eyes to the self-destructive narrative at the heart of our national story. He does this with a hopeful heart—with full faith that if we confront these truths with*

*clarity, honesty and courage, we will together be able to rebuild a new house on a foundation of love and justice.*

*In our tradition, there are thirty-six tzaddikim-- truly righteous people-- in every generation, and on their account the world is sustained. Bryan Stevenson is one of those tzaddikim, I have no doubt. And his Museum and Memorial, in Montgomery, are sacred ground.*

*We spoke on the Thursday before Yom Kippur. In a time of so much trauma and upheaval, Bryan was exactly the person I wanted to be in dialogue with this Yom Kippur.*

**Rabbi Sharon Brous:** Bryan, I am deeply grateful to you for joining us.

I have spent the last several months thinking about High Holy Days this year and contemplating the kind of conversation we need to be having in our Jewish community and more broadly speaking, throughout the country—a conversation about truth telling about national narrative, about the possibility of reconciliation and redemption about what a real reckoning looks like.

And I realized I really have two options. I can give a sermon in which I'm repeatedly quoting Bryan Stevenson, or I can invite Bryan Stevenson to join me in conversation and you can quote yourself. So, I thank you for being with us. I'm deeply touched and grateful that you would take the time to join us this Yom Kippur.

You and I both had the instinct that we should record this as close to Yom Kippur as possible, because the world is changing so quickly... we wanted to be able to respond to whatever's happening in the immediate. And even still, I don't think that either of us could have imagined all of the upheaval of just this past week alone, with the death of Justice Ginsburg, and what's now unfolding in Louisville, Kentucky, with the decision not to bring down charges on the officers who killed Breonna Taylor.

This is a very heavy and hard moment. I wonder if we could start with you helping us understand, from your perspective, what's happening in Louisville and throughout the country in the broader context of the quest for racial justice in America.

**Bryan Stevenson:** Well, first of all, thank you for inviting me to do this. It's such an honor to be sharing with you and the community on such a holy day, in such an important time in our nation's history.

I do think we have run out of time to deal with this long-standing problem that has hovered over our nation since the very beginning. I think so much of the frustration and the anger that you've seen on streets throughout this country around the world is a symptom of this larger illness that we've just refused to treat for so long. And I don't think we can understand what's happening without understanding the underlying nature of this problem. I mean, we are not a free country. People in this country are not free. We are burdened by a history of racial inequality and racial injustice, which I think has polluted the air. I don't think we live in healthy spaces. I think the spaces we live that have been corrupted and polluted by this long history of racial inequality and racial injustice, and that smog in the air has caused distrust and a lack of awareness that I think we have not adequately addressed.

In this moment, it's become clear and clear that we can no longer hide from this. The silence has to end.

Police violence is a part of American history, from the very beginning. Before slavery was over, police officers were formed in part to track down fugitive slaves as part of the Fugitive Slave Act.

After enslavement, during that period of Reconstruction, law enforcement officers stepped back and allowed mobs to engage in terrorism and violence for nearly a century. During the 1950s and 60s, we've overlooked the fact that those incredibly motivated, incredibly faithful Black and white people who put on their Sunday best and went to places just to ask the court to honor its commitment to equality and justice were frequently beaten, bloodied and battered by uniformed police officers. It was the police that beat John Lewis on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. It was the police that put dogs and fire hoses on children in Birmingham, Alabama.

And then in the years after that when communities were disrupted again by police violence in Detroit and Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, you saw police officers acting violently. And that legacy is a legacy we've just ignored. We haven't talked about it.

What we've been trying to say to responsible law enforcement leadership is that you have to change your identity, given this history. You're going to have to do some things to reckon with this past of menace, control and threat directed at Black people.

And because we're in this moment of over-incarceration, our prison population has gone from about 200,000 in 1972 to 2.2 million. Today we have the highest rate of incarceration in the world, and no one seems to be particularly bothered by that. And the police become the visuals, the optics that maintain and sustain that over-incarceration. Six million people on probation or parole, 70 million people with histories of criminal arrests, the percentage of women going to prison increasing 700%. And so in our communities, poor communities, minority communities people feel threatened and menaced and overwhelmed by a carceral system that is every bit as dangerous as criminality, as violence, as robbery, as these other offenses. And that reality has created a certain breaking point. And what's interesting to me about Louisville and about the moment we're in right now is, despite all of this history in poor communities and communities of color, there is still this expectation of justice. We still need justice, despite the inability to obtain justice for so long. And that's why it's frustrating and disappointing when the justice system does not respond the way people want it to, the way people expect it to.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous:** I want to address all of those pieces. Let's start by talking about narrative. I want to think together about the power of a shared, foundational narrative, what it means to build a nation on a narrative that is not honest, and what it would mean to shed that narrative and to birth a new one.

I've been thinking about one way that narrative plays out in our Jewish texts. In our tradition, the reason that God wanted to punish the people of Sodom and Gomorrah was that the land was blessed with incredibly rich natural resources. It was a blooming oasis in the middle of the desert, abundant in food and gold and silver. In fact, it was such a rich and blessed land that its inhabitants said: Why should we open our borders to foreigners? They'll only come in here and deprive us of what's rightfully ours.

So they closed their borders to outsiders. But that's not all: they clamped down on inhabitants of the land who would show compassion or care to, as we say: the least of these. Their scarcity mentality fueled an overt criminality. In the Rabbinic tradition there are many Midrashim about terrible crimes

that would be committed in Sodom: they would cheat the poor, they would attack people for showing compassion.

There's one story in particular about the daughter of Lot, Abraham's nephew, who lived in Sodom. Her name was Plotit. The story is that she saw a poor person starving on the street, and her soul ached for him. So every day when she would go out to draw water, she would bring with her a pitcher filled with food from her home, which she would give to the poor person on her way to the well. The people of Sodom saw this poor person and they asked: How is he surviving? He should be dead by now from hunger! They investigated the matter and they caught her in the act of helping him, and they burned her to death. As she was dying, she cried out a terrible, aching cry, and our tradition says that that's the cry that the Holy One heard. That's the cry that awakened God to the injustices of Sodom and Gemorrah.

So the sin of Sodom is a scarcity mentality matched with overt criminality. But the most egregious sin is that that evil was propped up by an immoral legal system that would justify the cruelties perpetrated by the people.

You should know that my read of Torah is now very much informed by your teachings over the years; you've been an incredible teacher to me. Now as I read these texts, I have to wonder: why did the Rabbis tell the story this way?

They told this story because they knew and understood that Sodom could be burned to the ground, but the ethic of Sodom would continue to rear its head, whenever the suitable conditions would emerge. So we are called to be attentive not only to the scarcity ethic, not only to the overt criminality, but to the legal systems that prop up and support that kind of injustice.

I've heard you say many times that the South lost the Civil War but won the narrative war.

What is the danger of the perpetuation of the narrative of the Confederacy? And is there a way for America to extract itself from that foundational narrative, so that we can begin to build something new and different?

**Bryan Stevenson:** Yeah. First of all, I just so appreciate that story you tell because I actually believe that people of faith have been warned. They've been informed, they've been told, we have been oriented to recognize what false ideas and false narratives can do to corrupt a just society, a healthy society... The prophets warned communities about what would happen if they tolerated poverty, inequality and injustice. You read Amos and you read Jeremiah and the prophet Micah, who pose this in very clear ways: we have an obligation to see the necessity of justice.

Micah, the Prophet, says: What does God require? And the response is that we do justice. We love mercy. And walk humbly. That orientation kind of sits on us.

I do think we have a special opportunity and obligation to respond to these narratives. The narratives that we've inherited in this country are narratives that have set up a racial hierarchy. We allowed this narrative of racial difference to emerge when Europeans first came to this continent.

We had a genocide on this land. We killed millions of Native people to famine, war and disease. It was a genocide that slaughtered Native populations. But we tried to justify that by saying no, those Native

people-- they're different. They're savages. And the narrative of racial differences was created to justify the formation of a nation that talked about equality and justice for all, while doing this destructive, horrible thing to indigenous people.

The narrative of racial differences is what we relied on to then get comfortable with two and a half centuries of slavery. And the people who owned slaves, the enslavers, didn't want to think of themselves as immoral. They didn't want to think of themselves as non-religious, as unholy. So they had to create a narrative that justified enslavement.

They said these Black people are not like white people. They're not fully human. They're not fully evolved. They're less deserving, less capable, less human. That narrative of racial difference became the true evil of American slavery. It wasn't the involuntary servitude. It wasn't the forced labor. Those things were horrific. But the real evil was this narrative of racial difference, this ideology of white supremacy.

That just infested everything. Even many abolitionists believed in the abolition of slavery, but they didn't believe in racial equality. So when we end the Civil War, and we pass the 13th Amendment, it talks about ending involuntary servitude and ending forced labor, but it says nothing about ending racial hierarchy, being white supremacy. We don't effectively end slavery. I've argued: slavery doesn't end in 1865, it evolves. Because the narrative struggle over what equality means, about what justice means, does not succeed. That's why the North wins the Civil War, but the South wins the narrative war. The North ultimately embraces that narrative of racial hierarchy and white supremacy, and they allow a collapse after emancipation. They allow the collapse of reconstruction.

We pass the 15th Amendment to give Black people the right to vote. We pass the 14th Amendment to give Black people equal protection. And then we don't enforce those amendments for over a century.

And that drives to this era of terror and violence, of Black people being pulled out of their homes and beaten and drowned and lynched and tortured-- sometimes on the courthouse lawn!-- for a democracy that claims to be governed by the rule of law, to allow terrorism and violence. Mob violence to actually be played out on the courthouse lawn tells you everything you need to know about a narrative failure.

And when courageous people in the 50s and 60s find the strength to push back against that and to protest, they're beaten and battered. And we still get the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, but the narrative persists. That narrative of racial difference that seems uncompromised, and so after the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, you still have resistance to integration. And that narrative of racial difference continues with us today.

Today what breaks my heart is here we are in 2020, and I have to go places and tell young college students: you can be hard working, you can be kind, you can be skilled. I tell professionals, you can be a doctor or lawyer or a teacher. I tell researchers, you can be very, very skilled in your craft, but if you're Black or brown, you will go places in this country where you have to navigate a presumption of dangerousness and guilt.

We constantly have to navigate these presumptions. You get tired. Many of us are just tired. It's exhausting to live in a space where the burden is always on you.

I've been pulled out of my car by the police. When I was a young lawyer, I had police officers point a gun at me and say, "Move and I'll blow your brains out!" And the burden was on me to say, "It's all right, it's

okay.” To take that situation and calm down this young white officer with a gun pointed at my head. And that's not right... And it's dangerous in that setting. It's less lethal in other settings, but it's not any less painful.

I was in a courtroom in the Midwest during a hearing a few years ago, after I had just argued a case at the US Supreme Court. I sat down at the defense council's table, I had gotten there early. When the judge walked in, he saw me sitting there and he got angry. He said, “Hey, you get back out there in the hallway you wait until your lawyer gets here!” And I stood up and said, “I'm sorry, Your Honor. I didn't introduce myself. My name is Bryan Stevenson. I am the lawyer.” And the judge started laughing and the prosecutor started laughing, and I made myself laugh, because I didn't want to disadvantage my client who was much more vulnerable than I was. The client came in. We did the hearing but afterward, I'm sitting in my car thinking, I'm a middle-aged Black man. I've got a law degree from Harvard. I've got all these other things, and still I'm required to laugh at my own humiliation to try to get justice for someone, and it's not right. That is the immorality of inequality and injustice. It's the threat to a just society that emerges when we do not respond, when we do not speak out.

That's why I actually believe that connection to the story you tell about Sodom. It's incredibly important for those of us of faith who feel an obligation to stand against injustice. Because that's the only way we can change these narratives into an understanding of who we are and what our obligations are.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous:** Do you think it's possible, in light of everything that you've experienced personally and what you've witnessed on death row, for a new American narrative to emerge in which we all find ourselves on the same side of history?

You mentioned that slaveholders did not want to see themselves as evil. They read the same Bible that we read, and they justified the oppression of Black men and women as a religious calling, even while giving Black folks a Slave Bible to read, which stripped away the entire book of Exodus—I think because they understood the power of that story and its revolutionary call to justice.

Years ago, I was sitting in church on Christmas Eve, invited by my dear friend, Reverend Ed Bacon, who's now back in Birmingham. (I actually saw him actually at the Memorial.) He used to invite his Jewish and Muslim friends to come and sit in the front row for Christmas Mass.

I was a young rabbi, and this was my first Christmas Mass. Reverend Bacon stood up and shared this narrative: a young couple that was so poor, so marginalized that the wife, who is pregnant, goes into labor. She's right outside an inn, but not one person in that inn will give up their bed so that this woman can give birth in dignity. Instead, she is forced to give birth outside on the lawn.

And I remember Rev. Bacon saying that night that all of Christian history, for the last 2000 years, is an attempt to remedy that terrible act of injustice. I was listening to him and I thought: what's my narrative? His narrative resonates, but it's not my story. But what's *my* narrative-- as a Jew? And that's when I realized that our core Jewish narrative is *yetziat Mitzrayim*, the exodus from Egypt. Exactly the story that's stricken from the Slave Bible: the story that our people were oppressed, enslaved, and degraded for hundreds of years, and then in partnership with God, we walked toward dignity and liberation. And part of that narrative is a challenge: once we've left slavery, our eternal work becomes to

make sure that nobody else would ever suffer the way that we had. That's the core narrative of the Jewish people, also shared by so many others who hold liberation theology at their heart of their faith.

The power of a narrative is that it offers us both a sense of shared identity and also a sense of purpose.

I've thought a lot about that as I look at America-- especially over the past several months-- and contemplate the failed foundational narrative of America, the narrative of racial difference that has wrought so much violence and pain. The question is: can we craft a new metanarrative as a nation that gives us that same sense of identity and purpose that the story of the birth of Jesus gives to Reverend Ed Bacon and millions of Christians and the story of the Exodus from Egypt gives me and so many others? Could we imagine a narrative that's big enough for us all?

A little story: Right after Yom Kippur, we go out and put a stake in the ground. We build *sukkot*, little huts in our backyard, where we eat all of our meals, and sometimes sleep too. This connects us powerfully to nature and the fragility of life. One year, when my daughter was in seventh grade, she invited her best friend from school-- who is not Jewish-- to join us in our *sukkah* for dinner. It's beautiful. It smells great. It feels so holy to be out in a *sukkah* under the stars, vulnerable to the elements and also strangely protected. We sat out there for hours, we sang, we talked, and we debated, as we do. As my daughter's friend was leaving that night, she said, "You're so lucky that you have all of this-- all these rituals and traditions. I'm just white." It knocked me off my feet, Bryan. I thought, my God-- that's how we got into the current predicament that we're in, in this country. Because we don't have a narrative that white people can hold, a narrative of redemption, a narrative of repair. We don't have a shared narrative for America.

You have masterfully articulated the narrative that justified Native genocide and enslavement of Black people. I wonder: do we have the audacity to write a new narrative for what Reverend angel Kyoto Williams calls *the new America*? Could we create something together so that we're on the same side of history?

**Bryan Stevenson:** I think there is. To me, the powerful thing about faith is once you have the capacity to believe things you haven't seen you have the capacity to do great things. The greatest scientists, the greatest innovators, the greatest athletes all believed they could achieve things that no one else had achieved.

It was that belief that allowed them to do the things they've done. And that's the way human evolution is as well. When enslaved people came to this continent, many of them came from places where this ability to see beyond what the experience was very much a part of their tribe mission, their tribal orientation. And then that, of course, was fostered during that time of enslavement. I think about that being the key to how we build this new America.

My great-grandfather was enslaved in Caroline County, Virginia. And as a little boy he learned to read, even though he knew that could get him sold or worse, but he believed that one day he would be free. Think about that. It's the late 1850s, early 1860s. There is nothing about slavery in Virginia at that time that would rationally cause an enslaved person to think that they're going to be free. It was a permanent hereditary condition. That had been true for black people for 250 years, and yet he had this belief that one day he'd be free. So he learned to read for that new day.

And when emancipation came, my grandmother told me that all of the formerly enslaved people would come to their house every night and she would sit next to her father, and my great-grandfather would stand up and he would read the newspaper every night for the 4 million slaves so they would know what was happening. She said she loved the power, and people would hug him and loved him for giving him that gift that had been nurtured in this belief in things he had not seen.

She wanted that power, and even though there were no schools for her, she learned to read-- and she gave that to her children. She had ten children; my mom was the youngest of her 10 kids. That belief, that transfer of this desire to read was rooted in the belief that one day with a nation with that ability to read would be honored and it would open all the doors that are open for other people. And she gave it to my mom. We grew up poor in a community where people didn't have a lot of things. I remember my mother going into debt in the 1960s to buy us the World Book Encyclopedia. My friends had bicycles and basketballs and all kinds of games. We just had the World Book Encyclopedia. But it was rooted in this idea that if she could get us to see the world through those books, maybe we would believe in something else. I say all of that because we have in fact another history in this country. We have a history of endurance and a history of resistance. A history of faith, a history of transformation.

When enslaved people were emancipated, they had every right to want to do violence against the enslavers, to seek retribution, to seek revenge against those who had brutalized them. But instead, they had this hope that they could actually make this country own up to these values of democracy, equality and freedom. And even when those hopes were crushed by violence and lawlessness, torture and lynching, they continued to believe.

Think about what Dr. King and Rosa Parks and so many others did in the 1950s. They believed enough in America to put aside any weapon of violence, to put aside any enmity, to put aside hate and put on their Sunday best and beg and implore and push this nation to do justice or they got battered and beaten. Dr. King was assassinated, and yet there was still this belief.

I'm a product of *Brown v. Board of Education*. I grew up in a community where black kids couldn't go to the public schools. I started my education in a colored school. There were no high schools for Black kids when my dad was a teenager. He was smart, he was hard working, but he couldn't go to high school in our county. And so his opportunities were limited behind that barrier. But I got to go to high school, and I got to go to college. I got to go to law school. And all of that is evidence of this capacity, this ability to create a new America. But to do that, we are going to have to engage in a kind of truth telling that we have not engaged in before. We're going to have to tell the truth about the native genocide. We're going to have to talk honestly about slavery. We're going to have to talk honestly about what this country has done to create inequality and injustice. The new America that emerges from that will be the kind of America that is-- yes, bruised and scarred a little bit-- but stronger as a result. And in my faith tradition, we teach that that is a process of overcoming. That's how we get to redemption.

You can't come into my church and say, you know, I want the heaven and the salvation and the redemption, but I'm not going to own up to anything. I haven't done anything wrong. The preacher is going to tell you: it doesn't work like that. You've got to get on your knees. You've got to repent. You've got to confess. And repentance and confession is the process that leads us to redemption and salvation. They'll tell you: don't be afraid to confess. Don't be afraid to repent-- because on the other side of that is something that will lift you up.



We have the power to heal the wounds of enslavement and genocide and injustice and lynching. We actually have the capacity to create wholeness out of this broken history, but we can't get there if we're unwilling to tell the truth. When a spouse does something dishonest to another spouse and won't own up to it, that relationship cannot heal. I think that's what's also true in America.

So yes, I think something better is waiting for us. There is something that feels more like freedom, feels more like equality, feels more like justice, waiting for us in this nation. But we cannot get it, we cannot achieve it until we have the will, the courage to talk honestly about our past, to own up, to confess and repent, to acknowledge the harms and the wrong. To repair the damage, to remedy the inequality and injustice that we have inherited. And that's the moment that we're in.

I think this is the time to really commit to a new era of truth and justice. To a new period of restoration and redemption rooted in a truth telling period. Because you know truth and justice, truth and reconciliation, truth and restoration those things in my mind are sequential. You got to tell the truth *first*, because without truth, you don't know how to restore. You don't know how to reconcile. You don't know how to redeem. You don't know how to repair.

It's a necessary condition for all of those beautiful things that we believe as individuals of faith, but we understand that those are our prizes, the reward for truth telling.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous:** I resonate deeply to that.

I've been thinking about what we've heard over the last couple of months-- that we should stop testing people for coronavirus so that we don't get bad numbers when we find out how many people are actually sick. At the opening ceremony for the lynching Memorial, I shared that in our Rabbinic tradition, if you want to heal from an illness, you have to be willing to place the full body on the table, and do a complete examination in order to determine where the injuries and infections are. You can't address the sickness if you don't know what you're trying to heal.

In 2018, I took my daughters to Atlanta to do some poll monitoring for the midterm elections, and we had a big voter engagement prayer rally at Ebenezer Baptist the night before. (John Lewis was there, and he danced! It was wonderful.)

Pastor Raphael Warnock, my friend, asked if I would share some words, and what came to mind was the story of a beautiful congregant and friend, a member of our community who had horrible abdominal pains for several weeks. She was really suffering-- she could barely walk. She's a mother of four little children and she works full time-- this wasn't easy but she's really tough. Finally, one day she couldn't take it anymore and she went to the doctor, who took a look at her and rushed her to the Emergency Room. They found that she had a cancer wrapped around her spine. They couldn't say it had nothing to do with the abdominal pain, but they also couldn't confirm the connection between the two. But what's clear is that because of that pain, she made it to the ER, where she had lifesaving surgery-- and thank God, she's fine.

Here's what occurs to me: we're responsive, or reactive, to the immediate pain. But we don't often investigate to see what the deeper illness is in the system.

What I'm so moved by, but with both the Museum and the Memorial, is that you're challenging us to have a conversation not about the abdominal pain, but about the cancer that's wrapped around the spine of our nation. It's true: the abdominal pain is the thing that every day is leaving us breathless right now. But really, there's a deeper illness in the system that could be the thing that kills us if we don't attend to it.

As you know, in November 109 people from IKAR went on a pilgrimage to Montgomery, and we'll bring the next 100 people down as soon as it's safe to travel again. It is my hope that every person in America is able to visit this Museum and Memorial, because one cannot experience it and not be transformed.

When a person first walks into the Museum, we see a silent film that shows the devastation wrought upon enslaved people after the transatlantic slave trade was made illegal and the domestic slave trade began to operate at a fevered pitch. We see in this short film the way that family separation-- tearing enslaved families apart-- was normative in the South for generations, how it was actually national policy. We see how families were devastated by this violence.

When children were being torn out of their parents' arms at the border a couple of summers ago there were protests around the country with well-intentioned people holding signs that said: *THIS IS NOT AMERICA. In America we don't do this.* But we take one step into your Museum and you say: *this is America.* This is *exactly* what America is. This was legal in America for generations, official policy! And not only to enslaved Black people, but also to indigenous people. That's the kind of truth telling I know you encouraging us to engage in. And I agree with you, it's absolutely essential.

And I also know it's utterly terrifying.

And on this day, on Yom Kippur, on this day of repentance and atonement, we understand that. The reason it's considered the most joyous day of the year is because it's the day we're most honest with ourselves. There's a powerful idea that we live with layers and layers of falsehood, forming a kind of protective barrier around our hearts and shielding us from the hard truths. And then this day comes, and we dress in white, and we just bear the truth. Maybe for the first time all year, maybe for the first time ever.

This is really hard to do. There is anguish in the truth. Agony in the truth. And yet, we can't be free until we get there.

Do you believe that America will be able to reckon with the truth? Or will we just run and hide when confronted by it, because it's so ugly and so vast, the wounds are so deep? Will we actually be able to do the work that we need to do in order for this healing to happen?

**Bryan Stevenson:** Well, you know, it's a really important question. I think it depends on whether we find the courage it takes to tell the truth. You know, we've actually made progress on some long-standing vexing issues by shifting narratives.

Years ago, we didn't respond well to domestic violence. We didn't actually treat domestic violence seriously. If a woman was in a marital relationship with someone who was abusive and called the police, she had no expectation that the police would actually arrest that abusing spouse. The police would come and they would just try to get things calm. And we tended to marginalize that issue. For those who

are old enough to remember the Jackie Gleason Show, you'll remember that he used to end the show with this threat... he'd say: "To the moon, Alice!" This threat of violence would be a source of laughter.

Then we started shifting the narrative. Farrah Fawcett made a movie, *The Burning Bed*, where she took on the role of a woman who was being abused. And that narrative started to shift. We started listening to these perspectives, hearing stories of abuse and menace, of threat and violence that began to shift our comfort level. And I look at where we are-- and we're still nowhere near where we need to be-- but today, even our most celebrated athletes when they're credibly accused of domestic violence, there are consequences. That did not exist sixty years ago.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving inhabited that identity and began teaching this nation that we cannot be indifferent to the hazards created by people who drive while intoxicated. It was a very powerful emotional personal truth telling campaign, where people would talk about the loss of a child, they would talk about the loss of a loved one, and that truth telling caused our nation to reflect and then change. And we've gotten to a very different place when it comes to holding accountable people who drive while intoxicated.

We've been doing some truth telling about love and relationship and love is love. And the stories of same-sex couples that were undeniably stories about love have caused us to reflect and to shift. And it was that narrative that gave rise to marriage equality at the Court.

And so we have all kinds of evidence that it is possible for us to recognize and deal with this legacy of racial inequality. We absolutely should believe that we can do this, but it will require that difficult thing that you're describing. It will require that kind of truth telling.

I'm saying to newspapers, you need to tell the truth about the multiple ways in which you contributed to lynchings by your coverage, by the way you legitimated that violence.

I want institutions to reckon with the ways in which they facilitated that racial hierarchy by buying into it. I had conversations with members of The Motion Picture Academy, because there is a complicity. We have a whole catalog of films about cowboys and Indians that reinforced that narrative of racial difference, that ideology of white supremacy. Banks were complicit in denying loans to Black families and Black veterans after World War II by being unwilling to give mortgages, and that's the reason why we have a wealth gap.

There are so many institutions that need to, in my view, tell the truth about their past. And when you tell the truth, you have a different relationship to remedy.

For some reason in this country we hold wrongdoers accountable for corporate violations, tax violations, contract violations. You breach a contract, not only are you going to have to pay damages, you may have to pay punitive and other damages because we understand that that kind of harm cannot be tolerated.

When people are convicted of crimes-- if you steal something from someone-- you can't go to court and just say: Oh, you know what, I'm not gonna do that again, and that makes it okay. You're going to have to be held accountable. You're going to have to do something that goes beyond the harm.

And we do that everywhere except in the area of racial justice, in the area of civil rights. In the area of civil rights, after one hundred years of disenfranchising Black people, we passed the Voting Rights Act. To the states that were guilty of one hundred years of violating the Constitution, all we said to them is

“Don't do that anymore.” And they didn't say back, “We won't.” They actually kind of said, “Well, we'll look for some new ways to do that.”

We weren't thinking about that harm. We didn't tell the truth about that harm. I actually think that the states of the American South that disenfranchised people for one hundred years should have been required to automatically register Black people when they come of age. I don't think Black people should have to register to vote in Alabama. I think the state should do that as a remedy to our roots of disenfranchisement.

I don't think it would have been wrong for state universities in this region to open up their doors and offer admission at a discounted rate or even free or the children of the folks who have been excluded. That's how you repair and remedy, and we don't have a consciousness that gives rise to that. But if we embrace that, then yes-- I think there is something on the other side of this.

Look, I've gone to Germany. I wouldn't go to Berlin, Germany, even if everybody was nice, even if everybody was pleasant. I would not go there if they were silent about the horrors of the Holocaust. If no one acknowledged it, if no one talked about it, it wouldn't matter how nice people were in the moment-- I couldn't trust a society that did something that horrific and refused to acknowledge the horror of it. The thing that makes me feel okay about going to Berlin is to see all of that iconography, those stones in front of homes of Jewish families that were abducted during the Holocaust, taken away. To see the Holocaust Memorial in the center of the city, to hear people, honestly, encouraging me to go to these spaces. What makes me feel like it's possible there is that there are no Adolf Hitler statues in Germany.

The idea that we would honor and celebrate the architects and defenders of the Holocaust is unconscionable. And there are threats and problems there, don't get me wrong. There's a white nationalist movement that we have to worry about, but you don't see that kind of iconography. There has been some reckoning with what happened. And here in the American South, there is none of that. Here in America, there is none of that.

I live in a place where the landscape is littered with the iconography of the Confederacy. I live in a state where Jefferson Davis's birthday is a state holiday, where Confederate Memorial Day is a state holiday. We don't have Martin Luther King Day, we have Martin Luther King/ Robert E. Lee Day. And that narrative isn't just unique to the American South, it's everywhere. There wasn't a reckoning in California which prohibited interracial marriage until almost 1950. There hasn't been any of that.

It's achievable, but only if we find the courage to do the things that must be done. You start talking about race and most places in this country, people get nervous. They exit. You started talking about racial justice and people want to close their ears. We have to have the courage to not do that. The powerful thing is that when we have that courage beautiful things happen.

I think I've told you this story. We've been doing this project where we have people go to lynching sites and collect soil. We did one not too long ago and there was a middle-aged Black woman who came to the meeting. We give people a jar, a little implement to dig the soil, and we give them a memo that tells them where the lynching took place. We gave this woman her jar, her implement and her memo, and she was sort of nervous, but she said she was going to do it.

She went to a site somewhere in West Alabama and she got out of her car. It was a very remote location on a dirt road, and she went over to where the lynching took place. She told me she got down on her knees to start digging the soil, and as soon as she did, a truck drove by. There was a big white guy in this truck, who stared at her and slowed down, and then he stopped his truck and turned around.

He drove back by again. She said that the man stared at her some more and she got very nervous. And then this man parked his truck and got out of his truck and started walking toward her. And we tell people when they do these collections that they don't have to explain what they're doing. If they want to say they're just getting dirt for their garden, they're allowed to do that. And she said that's what she was going to do when this big white guy walked up to her and he said, "What are you doing?"

She told me, "Mr. Stevenson, I was going to tell him I was just getting dirt for my garden, but all of a sudden something got a hold of me and I told that man, 'This is where a Black man was lynched in 1937, and I'm going to honor his life.'"

And she said she got nervous, so she started digging real fast, and the man just stood there. And then she said the man said, "Does that paper talk about the lynching?"

She said, "It does."

And then he said, "Can I read it?" She said yes. She gave the man the paper and she kept digging. And the man read the paper, and then he put it down. And then he shocked her when he said, "Excuse me, but would it be okay if I helped you?" She said yes, and then the man got down on his knees. She offered him the implement to dig the soil, and he said, "No, no, no, no. You use that. I'll just use my hands."

She said that this man started throwing his hands into the soil with such force and commitment, and picking up the soil and putting it in the jar. She said his hands were black with the soil. There was something about the way he just gave it his all that moved her.

She started crying and the man stopped and he said, "Oh, I'm so sorry I'm upsetting you." "No, no, no, you're blessing me." She said she kept digging with her implement and he kept digging with his hands, and they were getting near the top of the jar and she looked over at him and she could see his shoulder shaking. Then she saw tears running down his face, and she stopped. She said, "Are you okay?" and he said, "No, ma'am. I just, I'm just so worried that it might have been my grandfather that participated in lynching this man."

He sat there and cried, and she sat there and cried, and they finished putting the soil and the jar. He said, "I want to take a picture of you holding the jar." And she said, "I want to take a picture of *you* holding the jar."

And she said that man insisted on coming back with her to Montgomery, to make sure she was okay. And then she said, "Come on in!" And he didn't want to come in, but she finally got him in, and these two people came into our space and put that jar of soil in the exhibit we have in our Museum.

Beautiful things like that don't always happen when you tell the truth, but until we tell the truth, we deny ourselves the possibility of the beauty of justice, the beauty of restoration, the beauty of redemption, the beauty of all those things are waiting for us. But we have to be willing to engage in these courageous acts of truth telling.

I've seen too much of it to believe that it can't be possible for this nation.

I've been lifted up by so many. I live in a community where I stand on the shoulders of people who have been beaten and battered, who did so much more with so much less, and they make it impossible for me to accept that we cannot do better. And that's the gift we've been given by our foreparents, by those who came out of that exodus. It's a gift to us if we understand the courage and the strength, the belief, the faith that that represents, and we have to hold on to that.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous:** I love that story so much.

Part of my job is standing by the graveside with people as we bury their loved ones. In our Jewish tradition we perform the burial ourselves, we cover the coffin with earth. Especially in Covid times, we're not allowed to use shovels, though I always prefer to use my hands anyway. But the image of these two collectively lifting and filling, lifting and filling, it feels like they're really laying to rest an old story, and building together a new one. And that is such a blessing.

One of the hallmarks of the High Holy Day season we are in right now is the idea of *teshuvah*, the idea that change is possible in individuals and in systems. And that if we engage in truth telling and do the work, that it's possible for us to find the kind of social harmony that otherwise wouldn't be possible.

And part of what's beautiful about this idea is that it keeps us from throwing people away... like this man. This is the way he was raised. I believe that there are entire segments of our population who have been raised on the lie of white supremacy, and they believe it because it's all they've ever known. And this man had a moment of awakening and awareness, in which he could see the truth, and that changed everything.

You mentioned earlier that truth and reconciliation have to happen sequentially: truth first and then reconciliation. In our tradition that's also the way that our Rabbis understand it. Maimonides, Rambam, wrote in the Middle Ages that there are many steps a person needs to go through in order to achieve forgiveness. You don't get forgiveness and you don't achieve reconciliation until you stop the behavior, show remorse for the behavior, regret it in your heart and in your head, so deeply that God on the heavenly throne would testify that you would never do it again. And then you verbally confess. You say it out loud, and own it. And in that way, we create the space in our society for people to come back after they've been on a path that has led them away from truth and justice.

So I really resonate to that story. It makes me think about the story that was being retold after the death of John Lewis about Elwin Wilson, the former KKK member who was one of first people who beat John Lewis, when he walked with another Black friend into the white waiting room at a station. It was a horrible beating, he was left for dead. And a lifetime later, this guy found his way to John Lewis and Lewis was able to forgive him because he recognized that this man had gone through a kind of transformation that I think our country needs to go through.

If we could see the redemptive possibility, I think that would combat a lot of the fear that people have about actually telling the truth.

**Bryan Stevenson:** I totally agree and that's the thing. I've seen this happen... Sports is a really powerful example of this. You know, most of our history, we didn't want race mixing of any kind. We thought that would undermine this narrative of racial differences and ideology of white supremacy. And then when a courageous few said, "Well I'm going to break the tradition" and Jackie Robinson becomes a major league baseball player and when Black athletes start to get into college sports, it no longer became acceptable to maintain this ban on race mixing if it meant we were going to lose. We wanted to win badly. And you know it's interesting in this region, college football is like religion. And these teams, you can see people come together and cheer and celebrate something remarkable, like a group of young men or group of young women coming together. And we've been acculturated to accept the elimination of those barriers in that quest toward winning. And then we get off the field and it's almost like they get restored automatically. And that tells me that this is about having the courage to push through these boundaries.

We've seen enough evidence of overcoming that it's not a crazy thing to believe. It's not an impossible thing to believe.

...When we do things that are intended to help people see the truth, there's often pushback. There's often resistance. I was so grateful to you for coming to our opening in 2018 when we dedicated the National Memorial, which honors thousands of Black people who were the victims of lynchings. Part of what I've been interested in doing is getting people to understand the trauma, the burden, the heaviness of having to live in this country that talks so much about democracy and equality while you're being threatened, while you're being terrorized, while you're being lynched.

Older people of color come up to me they say: Mr. Stevenson, I get angry when I hear somebody talking about how we're dealing with domestic terrorism for the first time in our nation's history after 9/11. They say: we grew up with terror-- we were worried about being bombed and lynched and menaced. We haven't really talked about the fact that the demographic geography of this nation was shaped by racial terror. The Black people in LA, the Black people in Oakland, the Black people in Cleveland and Chicago and Detroit did not go to those communities as immigrants looking for new economic opportunities. They went to those communities as refugees and exiles from terror in the American South.

There's a line from Alabama to South Central LA. There's a line from Mississippi to Chicago, and we haven't acknowledged that. When we opened this Memorial we wanted to try to do something that was healing to all of that trauma because when you suffer, the tears of sorrow that you shed create stains. When you are menaced, when you're abused, the tears of anguish that you shed create stains. They create a weight that can wear you down.

And on the morning of the [dedication of the] Memorial, you will recall that a lot of our stuff was outside, and I had gotten sort of preoccupied with rain. I didn't want it to rain for anything because I just was afraid that was going to disrupt everything. To get inside that Memorial square, where we you offered those beautiful remarks, you have to walk outside-- and I was just dreading a rain problem. And when I woke up that morning the skies were cloudy, and it was overcast. I thought, oh my Lord-- it's going to rain. It's going to mess up everything. And I just kind of got lost in the fear of this thing I couldn't control for a moment. Fortunately, we all got inside. We had hundreds of people in the square and you gave beautiful reflections and other people made beautiful reflections and in the middle of the ceremony, just before I was about to speak, the clouds just opened up and it started pouring down rain.

And you can hear the rain beating down on the top of that Memorial, and all of a sudden, this thing that I feared took on something radically different. Because when I was in that space that morning, and I heard those raindrops hitting the top of that Memorial, it was no longer something I feared, but something that gave me a new hope, new life.

And it sounded to me like in that moment that they weren't raindrops hitting the top of that Memorial. They sounded like tears of joy being shared by thousands of people whose lives have never been remembered, never acknowledged, never been uplifted. And the beauty of tears of joy, the beauty of tears of love is that they have the power to wash us. They can purify us like the black ash of a righteous fire, like the snow that comes straight from heaven above. There is a power to cleanse and restore and uplift and that's what I sensed in that space that morning.

That's why we invite people to come and visit us, and that is the gift that awaits us if we have the courage to do the things that must be done. That's our hope. That's what we have to hold on to.

This is a really uncertain time in American history. I've never been worried about as many things as I'm worried about right now. But I have this enduring hope, I have this faith that I'm going to hold on to because I still believe that beautiful things are waiting for us.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous:** I have to say that your hope has inspired so much hope in me-- and in thousands and thousands of people. The fact that you chose, on the way out of the Museum after we confront all that really hard truth telling, to put the word "hope" on the wall-- in the most beautiful and understated and subtle way-- that gives me hope. And we all need that desperately today.

Bryan, you are a treasure. I have learned so much from you, and I know our community has and the country has. I pray that you and I live to see your vision of a world redeemed.

If it's okay, I want to offer you a blessing as we close.

In the end of the book of Deuteronomy in chapter 22, there's a law regarding what you should do if you see that your neighbor's ox has gone astray and what we're told is *lo tukhal l'hitalem*-- you're not allowed to hide from it. You're not allowed to hide from the lost and discarded things in this world, things everyone else would want to ignore, sidestep, avoid.

When your work started, when you were working death penalty cases as a young law student, up until this very day, you have had eyes on those people others would rather not see. And you've sounded the call on a truth that many would rather not hear. You've never hidden from fulfilling that greatest and most difficult calling. For that I am so deeply grateful. I asked God to bless you with health, with strength, with healing of body and spirit. May this be a year of continued moral clarity and resolve, renewed purpose and love. We thank you.

**Bryan Stevenson:** Thank you-- I so appreciate that. What a thrill spending time with you rabbi. I really thank you so much.