

Who by Fire? Who with a Knee in the Back of His Neck?

Rosh Hashanah 5781, Oseh Shalom Synagogue

Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde

And who by fire, who by water?

Who with a knee in the back of his neck?

Who while jogging in his neighborhood?

Who with a bullet through her bedroom window, after staying up late with her eight-year old nephew?

Who while holding a mobile phone?

Who while sleeping in her home?

And who...shall we say...is responsible? [adapted from and sung to the melody of Leonard Cohen's, Who by Fire]

We say their names: George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Atatiana Jefferson, Stephon Clark, and Breonna Taylor.

And there are many more, so many more. [Black people are 3.5 times more likely than White people to be killed by police when Blacks are not attacking or do not have a weapon. Black teenagers are 21 times more likely than White teenagers to be killed by police. A Black person is killed about every 40 hours by police.](#)

It is shocking. It is really beyond shocking.

This brings to mind tomorrow's haftorah from the prophet Jeremiah--Thus says YHVH: A voice is sounded in Ramah, a wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children.

Rachel's voice is the Divine Mother, the Shechinah, weeping for Her children, weeping for these Black lives lost.

This brings to mind one of the calls of the shofar that we will sound shortly--the *shevarim*--the wailing, broken sound. Giving voice to our grief as we hear of yet another---how can it **possibly be?**--Black American killed by police. In its expression of brokenness, the *shevarim* of the shofar reminds us of the brokenness of our system of policing in our country.

So we begin with actually acknowledging that pain. The pain felt by so many Black Americans. The pain that has filled the hearts of any of us who have opened ourselves to these horrific events.

And we say today: *Hinei yom ha'din*. Today is the Day of Judgement, the Day of Justice. The day we are called to account. The day our actions--or our lack of action--is noted, is registered by the Divine accounting.

Just a few minutes ago we davened in the Amidah (on p. 365) "The Creator of the hosts of heaven shall be exalted through the rule of law, and God, the Holy One, made holy by the reign of justice."

How is God made holy through the reign of justice? It's through us. This idea is there even in straight traditional Judaism, not only through Reconstructionist-humanistic theology. **We** are the way the Divine vision of justice becomes real in our world. Through the institutions and societal structures we set up and maintain. That we take responsibility for, or for which we abdicate responsibility. That we reform and transform or leave as they are.

Rabbi Arthur Green writes of this, in his beautiful way, right here in our machzor, quoting from his extraordinary book of Jewish theology, *Seek My Face*, invoking the foundational principle of humanity being created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in image of God:

"We take it as our task to enhance each person's potential for realizing the divine image, remembering that each of us bears a portrait unique and vital to the wholeness of God. But how clear can that portrait be when its bearer is suffering from hunger? Or from political oppression? [Or, we can add: from police brutality?]....If we are going to enhance the divine image in this world, we must work to maximize human freedom, always remembering that it was only after we came out of bondage that we were able to look toward God's mountain.

That commitment to freedom also includes helping people to create the sorts of lives and social structures to allow that freedom a lasting and

secure home....Religious humanism...means a realization that the task is ours to do; we no longer wait for the divine hand, separate from our own, to come and save. This acceptance of responsibility is itself a sacred act for us. We seek to accept, with deeply humbling gratitude, the role of actor for divine compassion in the world of physical reality....” (Kol Haneshamah Machzor, p. 386)

Transforming our country’s tortured history of racism is up to us. *Aleynu*. It is part of the burden we bear, the responsibility we take on, as we seek “to enhance each person’s potential for realizing the divine image.”

As with so much of systemic racism, there are few quick fixes for ending police brutality against Black Americans.

It is important to recognize that there is a difficult history of trauma and oppression that stands behind any single incident of police brutality. As psychologist and scholar of racism and policing, [Philip Atiba Goff explains](#), “For any [policing], reforms to be successful...departments must first contend with their violent histories and the pain they’ve caused. Many departments got their start hunting down Black people who had escaped enslavement. Decades later, police enforced the segregation of entire cities and beat Black people for attempting to exercise their civil rights.”

Just to give a very concrete example of this history of trauma, right here in Prince George’s County: Our county executive, Angela Alsobrooks, grew up in this county. “Her family arrived in Prince George’s after her great-grandfather was murdered by a white sheriff’s deputy in South Carolina. Her mother, who was 9 years old at the time, was so traumatized that she did not speak for a year,” Alsobrooks said in a recent [Washington Post interview](#).

This is an intense burden to bear as County Exec. Alsobrooks oversees the ethics of policing here in our county.

Part of addressing police brutality is the issue of bad apples. But the bad apples are situated in a larger system. The officer who killed George Floyd, Derek Chauvin had been involved in 18 police misconduct cases. The officers who killed Tamir Rice in Cleveland in 2014, and Antwon Rose in East Pittsburgh in 2018—both Black teenagers—were dismissed from previous jobs as police officers! [When an officer is dismissed, typically the Fraternal Order of Police has helped them resign quietly instead of being](#)

[fired](#), giving these officers the ability to work for another department. This must change.

Part of the issue is realizing that police are not well equipped to handle folks with mental illness and to de-escalate situations.

And... the demands being shouted are of course not just for reform. The demand to “Defund the Police” is not an easy slogan for some of us to get behind. Black Lives Matter and other protestors are “[calling for a divestment](#) from policing and an investment in programs and social services in Black and other marginalized communities that could reduce the need for the police.”

As Jews, especially those of us who are white or who are viewed as white, we primarily associate police with protection. In response to a rise in white supremacist violence ([which the Trump administration has shockingly, consciously sought to downplay and turn away from as a threat, by the way](#)), we at Oseh have police officers in front of the building when we have larger groups here.

Black Americans have a very different experience of police; [two-thirds of Black Americans](#) don’t trust the police to treat them equally.

For those of us who are white, our experience with the police is one very powerful way we benefit from white privilege, regardless of our intentions.

For example, my children have grown up thinking police are helpful; they do not think twice about bounding right up to a cop to start asking them questions about whatever. Unlike virtually all Black American parents, I do not have to worry about having “the talk” with my boys, about how to behave with police. I don’t experience the existential worry about what could happen when my older son is walking home from a local park and encounters a police officer.

And...at the march and I rally I attended at Black Lives Matter plaza in DC on Juneteenth a couple months ago, one of the frequent protestor chants, which has been popular at other protests around the country was: “Who keeps us safe? We keep us safe!” ...But I’m sorry—that is just not my reality—at the end of the day, I want the police to keep Oseh Shalom (and my own home safe)—I don’t think “we keep us safe.”

And....How can we address these issues without demonizing police? How can we have compassion and empathy for the *extraordinary* difficulty of their situations? For the split-second life and death decisions they are forced to make? Over and over, police officers put their lives on the line to protect us—how can we address these issues I have begun to lay out and still honor the immense sacrifice police officers make for us?

So, yes, it's complicated. But we need to engage. Particularly for those of us who are White, we need to listen, we need to lean in, and we need to act.

I have spent my life as an adult Jew hearing the stories of how Jews engaged in the civil rights movement. I have seen us hold up the photo of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. King at Selma way, way more times than I could ever count.

We are living through the greatest time of racial reckoning in our country since those days. **How will we engage with it?**

One small opportunity to engage is coming soon to Oseh.

On Friday, Oct. 16, a local Black pastor, Victor Kirk, will address the topic of systemic racism and will offer thoughts about what the Prince George's Leadership Action Network (aka PLAN, a local community organizing effort Oseh could become a part of) can do to address it.

If you are interested in exploring Oseh's deeper involvement with racial justice work, please contact the co-chairs of our Social Justice Committee: **Linda Bergofsky or Ioana Stoica.**

To say: "Black Lives Matter," is another way to say *zochreinu l'chayyim*—remember us—***all of us, especially including those whose lives our country has far too often seen as "less than"***—for life.

Shanah tovah.