

E Pluribus Unam – Against Racism – Kol Nidre
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith

One night this summer Jen and I had dinner at the nicest restaurant in Taos, New Mexico, Lambert's of Taos. Google describes it as an "Intimate, upscale setting for contemporary American fare with a lounge and a tree-shaded patio." Not the place the frontiersmen of old would have eaten, but the perfect place for a couple of kids-at-camp New Yorkers looking to treat themselves to a beautiful setting and overpriced lamb chops. And the restaurant was outrageously good. Perfectly mixed cocktails, excellent service, delicious amuse bouche, and one course better than the last.

Part way through our meal two couples sat in a table adjacent to ours. They seemed to be in their early to mid-70s and, from their loud conversation we could tell that this meal was something of a reunion. The maître d' brought over a complementary bottle of wine, apparently the local couple were regulars. When their first course arrived, one of the women, the one who appeared to be local, led them in grace. Rather than a simple expression of gratitude, she went on for some time and made sure that her prayer was loud enough for others to hear. I do not begrudge anyone their religion, but it was clear that her grace was as much about virtue signaling as piety. Okay, fine. A bit later, we overheard the grace leader's husband say, "Yeah, I grew up on Long Island, there were Jews everywhere." Jen and I looked at each other. "A family down the street, Rosenblum I think their name was, they owned the local country club." The wife of the couple from out of town piped in, "I knew a Jewish family who had their own private plane. And this was back in the 80s." Jen and I rolled our eyes and ended our conversation to listen as the two couples play a game of one upmanship to show who knew a greater number of flashy, wealthy Jews. "Seriously," the man said, "it was like there was a Rosenblum on every corner!" And they all laughed. The lamb chops suddenly did not taste as good.

When we finished our meal, I walked over to their table. "I'm sorry to interrupt but I need to say something," I began. "My wife and I could not help but overhear your conversation. We're Jewish." The couples suddenly looked embarrassed, the man from Long Island looking down sheepishly at his plate. I continued, "I have to say that you made us very uncomfortable this evening. You began with a loud grace professing your commitment to good values. I cannot imagine that Jesus would have approved of the way that you spoke about Jews tonight. Perhaps you ought to try to speak and live closer to spirit of the grace that you made sure all of us would hear. You were so concerned with how many Rosenblums were in your neighborhood growing up. Do you know how that made us feel?" The woman who led the grace stammered, "I'm sorry. You're right. We were wrong."

Jen and I left the restaurant. We tried to make ourselves feel better by joking about the whole thing. We tried to make ourselves feel better by putting down the top of our rented convertible for the drive back to our hotel. We tried to make ourselves feel better by saying that they were just some dumb, harmless comments. But that was not the case. The comments showed an ingrained anti-Semitism. The comments showed that despite the fact that we were on a nice vacation, despite the fact that we could afford to be in the nicest restaurant in Taos, despite the

fact that we looked like everyone else in the restaurant with nice cloths and a good tan and pretty jewelry, despite all of it – they think of us as different, as other, as strangers in their land.

Anti-Semitism does not impact me daily because I can pass. Despite the fact that I'm a rabbi, I can walk into any room, any club, any stadium, any store, any interaction with law enforcement, any situation and I look like a white, Anglo-Saxon protestant, like someone who may well have an ancestor who sailed over on the Mayflower. My nose is a bit pronounced but my eyes are as blue as the Caribbean and my hair is a lighter shade of brown. Perhaps not the Scandinavian ideal, but certainly not a, not a, not a JEW! And so, people show me deference. Bellhops open doors for me. Maître d's try to find me a table. TSA agents barely glance at my driver's license. And random people who I meet treat me as a person of privilege and power, a person of whom nothing untoward could be suspected, a person who should be trusted and befriended and shown a sort of deference. And Taos reminded me that I am treated that way because I can pass. The nice-looking couples at Lambert's of Taos reminded me that if people knew I was Jewish, they might change their conversation, they would assume that I was wealthy, that I owned country clubs. If people knew I was Jewish they would factor that into their calculations when considering where to move – is there a Goldsmith on every block? Are there Goldsmiths AND Rosenblums? What, after all, is the proper density of Goldsmiths and Rosenblums to determine the desirability of a neighborhood?

The day after our dinner at Lambert's, we took a lazy boat trip down the Rio Grande. We each had our own kayak and besides a few little class two rapids, it was a relaxing float down a gorgeous section of river. The guide told us about the natural history of the deep Rio Grande canyon that cut through the broad desert plain west of Taos. He told us about the history of the indigenous peoples who lived in the area for millennia before white people came. And he told us about the wars fought between Mexicans, Navajos, Apaches, and white men pursuing their dreams of Manifest Destiny, their dreams of a land controlled completely by white people from sea to shining sea. Seeing offshoot canyons where native people hid from white men got me thinking.

I had always thought of myself as part of the "we" that conquered the west. I had never reflected too deeply on what that meant, what moral implications that may have, but I just felt – I still feel – unconsciously and completely American. But looking at that canyon and hearing the words from the night before echo in my brain, I realized that in the minds of many Americans I, we, Jews, are other. Perhaps not as other as the once great Navajo Nation, but still not the white Christian ideal that propelled Manifest Destiny.

To be clear, Jews are not other when it comes to the ideals of this great country, no one is. Ideally, this country has no other. Ideally, we are a great potpourri of peoples and languages and ethnicities and ideas who come together to form the greatest democracy this world has ever seen. Together with people white, black, Asian, Indian, and Middle Eastern; people who are Christian, Muslim, atheist, Hindu, and Buddhist; together with every kind of person, we build this country, defend this country, work for the future of this country, create opportunity in this country – E. Pluribus Unam – out of many, one. That is the ideal, an ideal that I believe in and work towards and preach about and hope for. But sitting at the edge of that canyon and thinking about getting rid of native people and seeking the right density of Rosenblums made me realize – really feel in

my core – that there is so much more to do to achieve this ideal. The work is not only about Jews, not only about anti-Semitism. The work we need to do to reach the American ideal is about every person who can be othered, every person who needs to pass or wants to pass or cannot pass, for every person that is not part of the Manifest Destiny vision that powered white men across the plains and caused the native people to hide in Rio Grande canyons.

When our grandparents or great-grandparents came to America they were other. When they first arrived in Lower East Side tenements or Washington Heights apartments, they were clearly the new immigrants, with the accents, working the menial jobs, to help their children through school and on to a better life. It is an up by the bootstraps story that inspires us, that rightly makes us feel proud of our families and their accomplishments. Yet the story we tell ourselves is missing a piece. The story that we tell ourselves leaves out the underside of America that gave us a boost, that allowed many of our families to succeed in ways others cannot. Somewhere early in our families' time in America, those of us of European descent went from being other to passing as white. As Isabel Wilkerson writes in her powerful book, *Caste*, “Oppressed people from around the world, particularly from Europe, passed through Ellis Island, shed their old selves, and often their old names, to gain admittance to the powerful dominant majority... They went from being Czech or Hungarian or Polish to white, a political designation that only has meaning when set against something not white... It was in becoming American that they became white.”¹

The Jews of Europe were not white. White was not even a thing in Europe. Those of us from Europe, we were Jews. We were as “other” as black people in America, as untouchables in India. When we came to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we understandably sought every way to advance and that meant becoming white, what we euphemistically call becoming American. We lost our accent, we learned to play baseball, we started our own country clubs and law firms and investment houses. We maxed out the quotas at universities which allowed us to form the friendships and social connections that we needed. And, by passing or actual acceptance, we entered the powerful dominant category of white American. We do not have a generations long connection to other white people by “culture or language or faith or national origin but solely on the basis of what [we] look like.”² Those of us whose families hail from Europe increased the size of the white majority in America. And, we were ultimately rewarded with all of the benefits of being white – something that we simply had not been before arriving here.

I benefit in incredible ways from the racism in this country. I benefit in ways explicit and implicit, financially and academically. I benefit from the opportunities available to me as a white man and from the barriers of suspicion and bias that I need not face because I can pass. But sitting at that table in Taos, I recognized a paradox: as much as I benefit, I am also other. As comfortable as I am in my day-to-day life, I am other from the American mainstream, considered different. I can pass, but I am other. Both things are true. I benefit from being white. And I am still other.

This is a real tension. On the one hand, it is tempting to simply say, “I never held slaves, I never shot native Americans, I never discriminated against Chinese rail workers. My ancestors did not

¹ *Caste* p 49

² *Ibid.*

either. I did not create the systems that oppress non-whites. And, certainly, I am not racist myself. Therefore, sympathetic as I am, I have no responsibility for racism.” And, on the other hand, I clearly benefit from looking white. As Wilkerson writes, “... what has gone before us grants us advantages or burdens through no effort or fault of our own, gains or deficits that others who do not look like us often do not share.” Should those of us who pass as white accept those benefits without considering the burdens they place on others? Should those of who do not pass, those of us who are proud Jews of color, or non-Jewish people of color who are part of Jewish families, should they have to bear burdens without the support and understanding of the rest of the Jewish community? I think not. And so, we have a moral obligation to dismantle the role of race in the system that gives many of us so many privileges.

Genesis makes clear this moral obligation when it teaches that every person is created in the image of God.³ According to the Talmud this means: “We provide for the gentiles’ poor with the Jewish poor, we visit gentiles’ sick with the Jewish sick, and we bury the gentiles’ dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.”⁴ Certainly we have the moral imagination to add “we fight discrimination against gentiles with discrimination against Jews”. Or, put plainly: “we fight racism together with anti-Semitism.” And what does that mean? It means working to reform the discriminatory parts of society that nevertheless benefit us. It means having the humility to believe the truths of others as we would want them to believe our truths. We have a moral obligation to do it because all humans – no matter their skin color – are created in the image of God. And, if that is not enough, we should do it because, as Jen and I heard at Lambert’s of Taos, we Jews are still the other, no matter the color of our skin.

I wish I could go back to those couples from Lambert’s of Taos. I wish that I could pull a chair up to their table, pour myself a glass of their complimentary wine, and tell them that I’m Jewish. Tell them that, as a Jew, I want to talk about what I heard them saying. Yes, I want to talk about the anti-Semitism behind their remarks. But I also want to know where their families came from. Were they descendants of Irish or Italian immigrants who were persecuted as other when they arrived in the US before becoming white? Did their families come on the Mayflower to escape being othered by the Church of England? I wish that we could sit around that table and talk about the fact that whiteness is a made-up construct, that when you go back far enough, all of us have suffered discrimination. And then I’d want to make an agreement with them. I’d want us to agree that we will be part of the generation that will end the racist systems of America. I’d want us to imagine, and figure out how to work for, an America where no one gets ahead or falls behind because of their skin color, religion, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexuality, or any of the other categories which we have used to force some down and allow others to rise. I believe that that woman is characterized more by the spirit of the grace she offered than the conversation that followed. And I believe that all of us, all Americans, can reinvent our nation to truly live out its motto: E Pluribus Unam – Out of many, One.

³ Genesis 1:27

⁴ Gittin 65a