

OTHER? OR BROTHER?

Yom Kippur Morning, 5781

September 28, 2020

Jonathan Blake, Westchester Reform Temple

Scarsdale, New York

Let me tell you about my brother, Jacob.

Though we share the same last name, we could not be more different:

I am forty-seven. He is twenty-nine, eighteen years my junior.

I live in the Northeast and he lives in the Midwest.

I am named *Moshe* in Hebrew, for my late grandfather, Morris Blake, *z'l*. He is named for *his* late grandfather, the Rev. Jacob Blake Sr., a Civil Rights activist.

I am a Jew. I don't know anything about my brother Jacob's religion, what God he prays to, what tribe he affiliates with. We

do know that his outspoken father has a dismaying record of making outrageous antisemitic and anti-Christian statements and supporting the notorious antisemite Louis Farrakhan.

Like I said, my brother and I could not be more different.

I am White, and my brother is Black.

And right now, I am standing on my own two feet, while Jacob Blake is paralyzed from the waist down, having taken seven bullets to the back, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on August 23rd.

Blake is, of course, only one in a long list of names of Black men and women brutalized by law enforcement, a list that includes George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and Daniel Prude, and so many, so many names before theirs.

I come here today not to acquit or convict, although I would remind us, that in America—as in Judaism—extrajudicial killings violate the law, even when a person is suspected of a crime.

No, today I bring a different message, one for the Day of Reckoning, this day of Yom Kippur. There will be other days to talk about what's broken and needs mending in our politics, what's broken and needs mending in our system of policing, what's broken and needs mending in our public discourse. But today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Today, I want to talk about what's broken in my heart, what needs mending in our humanity.

Today, I want to talk about brothers.

Now, brothers are all over the Bible, and it would be an understatement to say that the business between and among Biblical brothers can get complicated. Cain murders the first brother, Abel, in a frenzy of jealousy and then rages back at God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"¹—a question that God never directly answers but which echoes throughout the Torah, down to the present day.

Ishmael and Isaac, common sons of Abraham, live a life estranged. The bitter rivalry of fraternal twins, Jacob and Esau,

¹ Genesis 4:9.

occupies ten full chapters of the Book of Genesis. And what can we say about Joseph and his brothers that hasn't already been sung in an amazing, technicolor Broadway musical?

And then there's the troubling fact that the Jewish tradition can't even agree on what the Torah means when it uses the word "brother."

Does it mean only a sibling, one who shares the same family unit? The Book of Leviticus uses the word "brother" much more broadly:

וְכִי-יִמוֹךְ אָחִיךָ וַיִּמָּטֶה יָדָיו עִמָּךְ וְהִחֲזִיקְתָּ בּוֹ גֵר וְתוֹשֵׁב וְחִי עִמָּךְ:

If your brother falls on hard times, and is unable to support himself in your midst, you should support him as if he were a stranger or sojourner, and let him live among you.

אַל-תִּקַּח מֵאִתּוֹ נֶשֶׁךְ וְתִרְבִּית וַיִּרְאֵתָּ מֵאֵלֶיךָ וְחִי אִתְּךָ עִמָּךְ:

Do not take any profit or interest from him, but rather, act out of reverence for God and let him live by your side as your brother.²

² Lev. 25:35-36.

Clearly, what’s meant here is something more than a literal sibling; we’re talking about a person in need, whom the Torah considers more like a resident alien who has become poor, requires assistance, and we are expected to do the right thing and treat another human being as part of the family.

Along comes the Book of Deuteronomy with a modified take on “brother.” The context in which the word appears is similar; we’re still talking about the prohibition against lending at interest or financially exploiting the disadvantaged:

לֹא־תִשִּׁיךְ לְאֶחִיךָ נֶשֶׁךְ נֶשֶׁךְ כֶּסֶף נֶשֶׁךְ אֶכֶל נֶשֶׁךְ כָּל־דָּבָר אֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂךְ:

You shall not deduct interest from loans to your brother, whether in money or food or anything else that can be deducted as interest;

לְנֹכְרֵי תִשִּׁיךְ ...:

*but you **may** deduct interest from loans to foreigners.³*

So, by adding one tiny clause, two Hebrew words, *l’nochri tashich*, “but you **may** take interest from **foreigners**,” Deuteronomy implicitly changes the meaning of “brother,” defining it more narrowly. Your “brother,” it seems to say, means, one of your

³ Deut. 23:20-21, emphasis added.

own. Not a “foreigner.” Not “*other*.” Someone from *your tribe*. What we might call in Yiddish, *landsman*, a fellow Jew, or, even *more* narrowly, a fellow Jew from the same part of the Old Country, maybe even the same *shtetl*. (This same passage, by the way, gives rise to the concept of a “Hebrew Free Loan Society:” a lending association by Jews, for Jews, specifically developed by already established American Jews to help their *landsmen* obtain a foothold in the New World.)

This passage also made it possible for Medieval Jews to work as much-reviled moneylenders in Christian Europe, a vocation considered dishonorable for good, God-fearing Christians. With Deuteronomy’s more narrow read, Jews could lend at interest *to Christians*, so long as they did not charge interest *to their fellow Jews*. (You can imagine how this played out in Christian European society, where antisemitism had already run rampant for centuries, in the worst cases actively sponsored by the Church, and the State, which were often indistinguishable from one another.)

Still, I am not convinced that what the Torah originally meant by “brother” referred *only* to one’s own “folk” or “tribe” or “*landsman*.” The Book of Leviticus, by not qualifying the term at

all—by simply saying, let the needy “live by your side as your brother,” without any special treatment stipulated for fellow Jews, nor exceptions made for non-Jews—suggests to me that, at its most noble and expansive, our Torah tradition sees *every* human being as our brother, our sister.

Such a read derives as much from Levitical laws of lending as it does from the Torah’s opening words, which declare that God created humankind *B’tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine Image. “Male and female, God created them.”⁴ *Every* human being, of every color and creed, ethnicity and nationality. *Every* human being, of every state and social station, every gender and sexual orientation, every ability and disability. *Every* human being, of every size and shape, age and language. *Every* human being might be my brother, my sister. Surely, by *beginning* with this lofty declaration, the Torah wishes to set out its overarching vision for humanity.

“*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” Cain’s question is still alive. Each of us must answer with our actions.

So how shall we respond to the manacled and the maimed, the marginalized and the murdered, when we see their faces on TV?

⁴ See Genesis 1:26-27.

Do we see them, and think “other?” Or “brother?” Stranger? Or Sister? Which impulse do we follow?

Before you answer, let me share with you a Yom Kippur story, from the *Yerushalmi*, the so-called “Jerusalem Talmud,” which was compiled in the Galilee around the same time that its more famous sibling, the *Bavli*, or Babylonian Talmud, was being written in Babylonia. It’s a story about a venerated teacher of Torah named Shimon ben Shetach, and it goes like this:

Shimon ben Shetach was struggling in the cotton business. His students said: “Rabbi, ... let us buy you a donkey [to ease your travels], so you will not have to work so hard.” They went and bought a donkey from a Gentile, which had a precious pearl [tucked away in the saddle bag] hanging from its neck. They returned to [Shimon] gleefully, saying, “With this good luck, you’ll never have to work again!” When Shimon learned about the pearl, he asked his students whether the Gentile had known of it at the time of sale. When they said no, he ordered them to return [the jewel].⁵

⁵ *Talmud Yerushalmi, Bava Metzia, 2:5.*

So far, so good. Here we have a Master Teacher of Torah living out Torah values. Shimon assesses a case of potential fraud here—that his students have taken something of value from another person, without the seller’s knowledge—and orders the property returned. But listen to how his students respond.

Well trained in the intricate study of Jewish texts, Shimon’s disciples know a thing or two about how to argue with their Rabbi. They quote another teaching right back at him, with an impressive pedigree of Rabbis to back them up. They retort:

“But did not Rav Huna Bivi bar Gozlon teach, in the name of Rav—and authorized by none other than the great Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi—that even if we agree that outright *stealing* from a heathen is forbidden, nonetheless, *appropriating his lost property* is totally permitted?”

Now, Shimon’s students are no dummies. They are also no saints. When they made the purchase of the donkey, and found this precious jewel in its saddlebag, don’t you think it occurred to them that keeping it was, well, not exactly kosher? So they come up with a way to rationalize their decision. They think to themselves: “This Gentile, who sold us his donkey--it’s not as if

he's our *brother*. He is 'other.' What difference does it make if we profit from his loss, especially if he doesn't even realize what's happened? What's the harm? And, not only that, do we not have a teaching *from some of the most esteemed rabbis who ever lived* that suggests that it's okay to 'appropriate lost property' from another person, so long as it's not a fellow Jew? Who is this *heathen* to us, anyway?"

So they present this legal argument to their Teacher, who loses his patience and exclaims,

“What? Who do you think I am, a barbarian?! I would rather hear [others say], “Blessed be the God of the Jews” than have all the money in the world!⁶

End of story. You see, Shimon understood that the issue at hand is ethical, not legal. Shimon cared not only about what was *permitted*, but also--and more importantly--what was *right*. Shimon wanted Jews and Judaism to be not so much smart, or clever, but *righteous*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Now, I have promised you that I would “talk about what’s broken in my heart, what needs mending in our humanity,” and we have arrived at the moment of truth. Because, as I studied the story of Shimon and his disciples, I realized that, no matter how much I *wish* that our religious tradition would declare unanimously and consistently that the word *brother* always and forever means *any other member of the human family*, I arrive at a different conclusion—a more complicated conclusion, a conclusion that requires each of us to search our hearts—which is that Judaism (which rarely gives anything less than two opinions for any big question) offers two competing outlooks, two perspectives at odds with each other: on the one hand, the *universal*, to see ourselves first and foremost as part of all humankind; and, on the other hand, the *particular*, to see ourselves first and foremost as part of a small and specific group of people, one with a unique history and destiny, different from everyone else.

Come to think of it, we Jews *need both* of these outlooks: the universal *and* the particular, the global *and* the tribal. Without a *tribal* outlook, we miss the beauty and power of our specific religious tradition—*our* Torah, *our* ways of expressing ourselves, our language and culture and holidays and foods and music, our calendar and our customs, our mores and our mitzvot. And

without a *global* outlook, we miss the overarching *function* of Judaism, what the Rabbis called *L'taken Olam b'Malchut Shaddai*, “to restore the world under the sovereignty of the Divine,” or *Tikkun Olam* for short.

With *only* a tribal outlook, everyone else becomes *Other*. *Only* my fellow Jews are “brother.” Or, worse, we subdivide ourselves into smaller and smaller clans with pettier and pettier distinctions and definitions. *Only* my *landsman*. *Only* the *landsman* from my *shtetl*. *Only* the ones who affiliate the way I do, Reform or Conservative or Orthodox. *Only* the ones who come to Shabbat services or Torah study or Freebirds events or who have the same teacher as my kids. *Only* the ones who support Israel the way I do, or who vote the way I do. *They* are my brothers. The *others* are just that, *Other*.

Keep this up and we end up like Cain, wiping our hands of our own sibling's blood.

But the fact remains that Judaism gives us both the choice, *and* the textual justification, for how we shall view every human being:

either as *brother*, or *other*, either as a member of *our* family, or as part of the *human* family.

It's easy—easy for me; easy, I think, for most of us—to look at Jacob Blake and see *Other*. Somewhere along the way, our paths diverged. His ancestors came to America under very different circumstances from mine. Both of our great and great-great grandparents were surely persecuted minorities; but our family's destinies in America took different roads.

The fact of our shared surname is, at the end of the day, nothing more than a coincidence. My ancestors did not come to these shores with the name “Blake,” of course. In the Old Country, it was *Blecher*, Yiddish for “tinsmith.” When my paternal great-grandfather, Abraham Blecher, emigrated from Russia at the turn of the 20th century, he arrived through Ellis Island. Believing that America was a country in which a Jew could openly be a Jew, he determined that he would in fact be a “top Jew”— a *Kohen*.

His documentation was altered so that he assumed the surname “Cohen” under which he lived, married, and had children of

whom my grandfather, Morris Cohen, was one. Undeniably bright and ambitious, and having attained a high school diploma, he nonetheless could not find better than menial employment. He and two brothers, Harold and William, correctly deduced that the name “Cohen” was not an asset in the troubled years of World War II, and had it changed back to the original *Blecher* with one important modification: they now shared a surname with a famous non-Jewish English poet.

Within weeks, Morris Cohen, re-Christened Mo Blake, found employment at the Trenton Pipe & Nipple Company, a vital war industry supplying the Navy, and soon became Plant Superintendent.

But then again, as Rabbi Reiser taught us in his Rosh Ha-Shanah remarks, American Jews seeking to assimilate into a White, Christian milieu have always had an advantage over our Black brothers and sisters. Like most American Jews of the post-war Era, my grandparents, parents and I all have benefited from being seen as White. My family had an opportunity to change their name. Jacob Blake and his family will never have the opportunity to change the color of their skin.

CODA

So, today, I ask us to reckon with the choice before us: how, in this new year, in a world riven by division, will we regard our fellow human beings? As Other? Or Brother? Sister? Or Stranger?

I don't know if asking this question will mend the brokenness in our world. But I do think we could use this Yom Kippur to work on what's broken in our hearts. "If the Earth were your body, you would be able to feel the many areas where it is suffering," says Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn. Compassion begins with the awareness of suffering. Empathy comes from the hurt places in me that recognize the hurt places in you.

My own broken heart will begin to heal when the world sees the bond between Blakes as deriving from the fundamental fact of our shared humanity, and not the coincidence of our shared surnames. I began by saying that my brother and I could not be more different. I conclude by saying that we—brothers and sisters, each of us, all of us—*could not be more the same*. Jacob

Blake deserves to be standing upright on his own two feet, the same way I stand before you today. *Each one of us* deserves to fulfill our human potential as reflections of God, creatures made in the Divine Image.

The essential truth of our existence is this: that there is only one thing, and we are all it.

So let us give thanks: first, to our Jewish tradition, which teaches us the value in perspectives both particular and universal, both local and global.

Let us give thanks, as well, for having reached another Day of Atonement, still alive, and perhaps a little wiser, a little more humane, and a whole lot more inspired to do God's work here on earth.

And let us give thanks, above all, to the Eternal, in whose Unity, every difference becomes part of the grand mosaic of life; in whose totality each *one*—each individual life, every nerve ending and every ocean, every beating heart and every pulsing star—becomes part of *the One*.

Blessed be the God of the Jews.

Blessed be the God of the human family.

Blessed be the God of all Creation.

Amen.