

When the World is Burning

A Sermon in Response to the Murders of Ahmaud Arbery,
Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd

Westchester Reform Temple, Scarsdale, New York

Friday, June 5, 2020

A true story:

Seventeen years ago, just days after beginning my new job as the Associate Rabbi of Westchester Reform Temple, I was invited to participate in a conversion ceremony. It takes three rabbis to make one Jew. That is to say, a *Beit Din*, a rabbinical court, a panel of three duly ordained rabbis is convened to authorize a conversion to Judaism, so I joined my WRT colleagues, Rabbi Rick Jacobs and Rabbi Angela Buchdahl (and our soon-to-be-official Jew) at the local *mikveh*, the ritual bath, at Temple Israel Center in White Plains.

I was walking back to my car when I noticed a plume of dark smoke streaming from a nearby house. Rick and Angela immediately identified the burning building as our neighboring congregation, Bet Am Shalom, which, by the

way, is just a few blocks from where Kelly and I presently live.

We rushed to the adjacent parking lot and met the firefighters, police officers, Rabbi Les Bronstein, Cantor Benjie-Ellen Schiller, and Bet Am Shalom congregants managing the evacuation. Moments after the fire had been extinguished, but before an all-clear had been issued to re-enter the building, some of my colleagues approached an officer and rushed *into* the smoldering synagogue with hospital stretchers, emerging minutes later with the miraculously undamaged Torah scrolls that they had rescued from the sanctuary.

In that moment, I felt deeply connected not only to our local rabbis and cantors, to our neighboring synagogues, and to these sacred scrolls that had been saved from danger, but also to Abraham, father-figure of our faith. A *midrash*, a Rabbinic legend, about Abraham, goes like this:

An ordinary man is going about his business, traveling from one place to another, when he notices a building all in flames. This man, Abraham by name, exclaims, “Why is no one doing anything? How can it be that there is no one to look after this place?” Suddenly, a voice calls out from

the highest balcony—itself almost engulfed in the inferno—saying, “I am the owner.” At that moment, the story goes, God—the “owner of the building,” so to speak, the One whose world is on fire—selects Abraham to be the father to a multitude of nations, and to lead them from the darkness of superstition into the light of faith.

Why Abraham? What special qualities did our ancestor possess that merited his divine election? In other words, what did God see in him?

The answer, according to this parable, is twofold: first, that Abraham walks with eyes open, that he pays attention, that he *notices* the fire; but also, that Abraham wonders aloud why this is happening, why is no one else paying attention, why is no one doing anything; and then he demands a response. What makes Abraham special is that he sees things not only for what they *are*, but for the way they *ought to be*, and then roars out his objection.

Abraham’s journey begins, that is to say, in an act of holy protest.

The world is an inferno. Who shall we be, in this moment? How shall we respond?

When I was a kid, we learned that the response to a fire is “stop, drop, and roll”—not, “run into the inferno.” We practiced this maneuver on the floor of the cafeteria of Parkway Manor Elementary School in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I was pretty good at the “stop” and “drop” parts, less coordinated around the “roll” — I usually ended up careening all of my 44 pounds of my first-grade body straight into Brian Chu’s kidneys.

And yet, this is no time to stop, drop, and roll away from the fire.

I am not talking, by the way, about that small percentage of lawbreakers who have seized upon this historic moment by breaking into stores, vandalizing buildings, or setting cars ablaze. The actions of this small and misanthropic few diminish, disgrace, and distract from a vital and just cause. We condemn them. There is no holiness in havoc.

But they are not the story, despite what some media choose to portray.

No, the fire of which I speak is a flame of righteous anger over a centuries-old legacy of American racism that continues to treat Black lives as less valuable than White lives, that continues to treat Black bodies as expendable,

that continues to confer disadvantage on communities of color, adversely affecting access to quality education, professional mobility, and equal treatment under the law.

An admirably principled and forthright figure you may have encountered in this week's news, Marianne Budde, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, speaks for so many of us religious leaders who cherish the Bible, who study the Bible every day, and who find in the Bible a wellspring of wisdom acutely suited to this moment.

“Scripture is clear,” she says: “Justice, which is the societal expression of love, matters most to God. Justice is also what is most important to those who are exercising their right to peaceful protest. They are expressing what we all know to be true: It’s past time to fix a law that allows police officers and vigilantes to go unpunished for crimes against people of color. It’s past time to correct the gross disparities in health care that Covid-19 has revealed. It’s past time to change economic and educational systems that privilege white people (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/trump-st-johns-church-protests.html>).

Racism finds expression not only in vile words and violent abuse. Such overt racism is grossly offensive, deserving of

censure. But that kind of racism is, truth be told, the *easier* kind to address.

The hard racism to extirpate is *covert*: the racism that insidiously burrows into the fine print of policy and the distribution of resources, into how wealth is accumulated and inherited, in the infrastructure of our cities and the all-too-intentional placement of highways and factories. If you want to confront racism, first you have to see the building burning.

In early March—it might as well have been a lifetime ago—Rabbi Levy and I traveled with 63 WRT members, eighth graders and their parents, to the American South. We marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. We got up close with a history-making bus ride at the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery. We prayed at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was baptized, where he preached, and where he was eulogized. And, most heartrendingly—at least for me—we visited the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization that works to end mass incarceration, excessive punishment, and racial inequality.

Founded in 1989 by Bryan Stevenson, a public interest lawyer and the author of *Just Mercy*, which last year was turned into a compelling biopic movie of the same name, the Equal Justice Initiative provides legal representation to people who have been illegally convicted, unfairly sentenced, or abused in state jails and prisons.

(The film *Just Mercy* has been made available for **free** online, for this month of June. Watch it here: <https://www.warnerbros.com/movies/just-mercy>)

The Equal Justice Initiative challenges the death penalty, excessive punishment, and helps formerly incarcerated people return to lives of purpose and productivity. We toured the EJI's museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which opened to the public just two years ago. It is America's first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.

Set on a six-acre site, the memorial features over 800 steel monuments engraved with the names of racial lynching



victims, one massive column for each county where a lynching took place. There are more than 4,400 names. Like visiting Yad Va-Shem in Jerusalem, or the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, you leave such a place transformed—not just aghast at the horror of it all, but awakened, aware that you share in a terrible legacy; you inherit a profound responsibility; you

cannot just go back to “business as usual”; you may not control history, but you must exercise what agency you have over future destiny.

The poet Rilke described such a moment of transformation: “[H]ere,” he wrote, “there is no place that does not see you. You must change your life” (“Archaic Torso of Apollo,” 1908, translated by Stephen Mitchell).

“You must change your life.”

That is the message embedded in this American moment.

Before today, we could walk along and not even notice the palace going up in flames. We could glide along, silent among the passers-by.

Today we must be Abraham.

These are tremendous times, terrible times, transformational times, times that demand courage, not complacency; sacrifice, not smugness; curiosity, not close-mindedness.

This is no time to stop, drop, and roll ourselves away from the flames.

Fortunately, it turns out that “Stop, Drop, and Roll” is not what they teach kids nowadays. Today, the concept we want children to internalize is this: if there’s a fire in your house, you should get yourself to a designated meeting place and wait for your family there.

And so, here we are, tonight. We are at our designated meeting place—it’s called Shabbat—and we are among family.

Tonight, we take comfort and shelter in one another. But we will not hide from the fire. Judaism exists in order to model a more perfect world. It demands that we not hunker down in fear of *what is*, but rather, challenge ourselves and our world to become *what it ought to be*.

Today, with our WRT family, our Jewish family. Our nuclear family, as it were. Tomorrow, with our extended family—the human family.

Because we can't do this work alone. If this crazy time—mass demonstrations colliding with a mass pandemic—has anything to teach us, let it be how deeply and inextricably interconnected we are, and must remain.

Tonight, this Shabbat, with our WRT family. Tomorrow, with the family of humankind, each soul an image of God, each life a divine flame.