

**Rabbi Kimberly Herzog Cohen**  
**Kol Nidre 5781**

Two hundred years ago,  
along the Nigerian shoreline of Lagos,  
children ran with abandon.  
On the palm-lined beaches,  
they watched with curiosity as large ships approached.

In 1937, former slave Martha King  
recalled the day her grandmother was captured in Africa.

*She was a little girl. A big boat was down at the edge of a bay and the people was all excited about it an' some of the bravest went up pretty close to look at it. The men on the boat told them to come on board and they could have the pretty red handkerchiefs, red and blue beads and big rings. A lot of them went on board and the ship sailed away with them. My grandmother never saw any of her folks again.<sup>1</sup>*

Seashore. Freedom. A child's curiosity. Then trapped.

The process then in place which led to capture,  
the Middle Passage journey across the Atlantic,  
the selling of slaves and their work on plantations,  
involved many—  
European traders,  
local African middleman and merchants,  
and willing buyers on the US side.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/freedom/text6/capture narratives.pdf>

It was a system where human cargo  
became no different than the handkerchiefs,  
the beads and the rings  
which tempted Martha King's grandmother to come aboard.  
A system of slavery where a child's future was in chains,  
where they were not even given a chance.  
This was a system that corrupts what we are morally called to be.

Soon after the end of the Civil War,  
the oppressive laws of Jim Crow began to take hold,  
continuing legalized control and subjugation of black people in all areas of life—  
employment, education, voting, riding the streetcar.  
Mob violence, lynchings, bombings carried out by the Ku Klux Klan,  
continued what slavery started.  
Here in our very own city,  
the slave whipping fields beside the Trinity river  
transformed into the mob lynching of Allen Brooks in 1910.  
He was hanged from Elk's arch at the corner of Ackard and Main,  
the terror captured in celebratory postcards.  
The terror has continued through the years,  
from the 1955 murder of Emmett Till to the present day killing of George Floyd.  
It's a terror that African Americans feel every single day—  
when going for a run in the neighborhood,  
shopping at the mall, attending school.

In 2001, Tarsha Jackson, a loan officer at Wells Fargo bank in Houston, learned that her 11 year-old, black son, who was later diagnosed as bi-polar, was arrested at school, handcuffed, and taken to jail:

*My oldest son was placed in a Juvenile Detention Center on allegations of breaking a \$50 window. After nearly nine months [of] detention, and nine months of advocacy, his release was approved by the presiding judge. But...instead of the agreed upon release, the judge sentenced Marquieth (Mar-keith) to the Texas Youth Commission without a parent present. Marquieth was incarcerated for three years and six months. My son was sexually, physically, and mentally abused. He received no education and was medically neglected.<sup>2</sup>*

School. Future. A Broken Window. Prison.

These are painful, difficult realities to face.

It can be tempting to run away and hide from them.

And yet, on this evening of Kol Nidre, and throughout our holiest of days,

Yom Kippur, until the gates close and then beyond—

**we are all called to face the truths of our history,**

**what's at stake in the present,**

**and our responsibility as a Jewish community to change the future.**

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.justice4families.org/stories/tarsha-jackson/>

This is hard work.

We all tend to draw back into the security of what we know, to deny or rationalize the past and avoid our collective responsibility.

The story of Jonah, which we will read tomorrow afternoon, reflects this human tendency—to retreat rather than reflect, to avoid rather than engage.

Jonah ben Amitai is directed by God to ask the people of Nineveh for their repentance—and instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah boards a ship heading in the opposite direction.

God sends a mighty storm in anger.

Jonah sleeps in the storm-tossed ship as the captain and crew cling for their lives.

*Ma lecha nirdam?*

‘What’s with you that you are sleeping?’ the captain asked.

In order to end the storm, Jonah told the men to throw him overboard.

With great hesitation and dread, they did so and the sea stopped raging.

A great fish, a whale, immediately swallowed Jonah up for three days.

In the belly of the whale Jonah prayed for redemption.

The whale delivered him to dry land where God again asked Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time he went.

The people of Nineveh did not question the truth of Jonah’s words or his authenticity. They repented and God forgave them.

Jonah was aggrieved that God was so forgiving—  
why did I just go through all this trouble when in the end  
you let them off the hook?

The story continues with Jonah finding comfort and happiness  
under the shade of a large gourd.

But God caused the gourd to wither and Jonah was left suffering without it.

God explains to Jonah, “now you know why I acted compassionately...in just a day  
you became attached to this gourd...I have cared about the people of Nineveh for  
years...”

Jonah ben **Amitai**, translated as Jonah a ‘person of truth’  
ironically runs away from truth.

So too, we might feel that the past is the past--what’s done is done.

And yet, the moral corruption and indifference

that kept slaves in the belly of a cruel reality continues today.

This is most evident in America’s current incarceration system.

There are currently 2.3 million people incarcerated in our country,  
and 70 million, 20% of our population, who have criminal records.

As for those serving time for violent crimes,  
clearly there is a need to protect ourselves.

However, nonviolent, minor offenses make up  
the overwhelming majority of cases in our jails.

According to civil rights lawyer, Michelle Alexander,  
"people of color are convicted of drug offenses at rates  
out of proportion to their drug crimes" (p.129).

White and black high school seniors use marijuana at the same rates,  
and white youth are a third more likely to have sold illegal drugs than black youth.  
And yet, one in seventeen white males will do prison time,  
compared to one in three African-American males.

Facts like these present a stark reality—  
there is a vastly disproportionate number of brown and black people in our  
criminal justice system...and why? Ultimately, because of accepted and  
perpetuated social norms that deem black and brown bodies a threat, a threat  
that needs to be controlled.

Why? Because a cruel system holds the future of children,  
like Tarsha Jackson's son, Marquieth, in chains, as it has for centuries.  
More often than we might think,  
children of bar or bat mitzvah age are prosecuted as adults,  
some states leaving children as young as eight to imprisonment.  
Children, mostly black or Latino,  
can be imprisoned without parole for non-homicide offences (*Just Mercy*, Bryan  
Stevenson, p.154).

The mass, physical incarceration of people of color for minor offences  
is one of the most egregious forms of enslavement.

But racial bias impacts all aspects of our society  
not only the halls of justice and law enforcement (pause)...

*Do you work here?*

A Jew of color in our congregation said she has been asked that question  
since she was twelve years old.

At Whole Foods, at the car wash, at Temple,  
this seemingly innocent or unconscious act,  
is a constant reminder of otherness,  
an articulated assumption that the person of color is here to serve...

Al Chet, for the sins we have committed...knowingly or not,  
we are all responsible for the systemic racism  
that has shaped our country, our communities, and ourselves.

A fellow parent in my predominantly white North Dallas neighborhood  
shared one of many moments during this pandemic that has stayed with me.

“One Sunday afternoon, I walked into my six year-old son’s room.

He looked up at me with eyes that were dull with boredom.

‘I feel like I’m in prison, Mom.’

Pained by the spark of light gone from his eyes  
in the hot days of a Dallas summer,  
my friend took him to the park and played hard,  
trying to distract him from the fact that this would continue.

She experienced only the very slightest version of despair  
as compared to our black and brown neighbors  
looking into the eyes of their children on countless occasions.

Imagine...imagine knowing a child you love  
will likely be physically imprisoned...  
and know it is 100 times worse than what we can imagine.  
This pandemic has created an opening  
for deeper awareness, empathy, commitment.  
What if looking at the pain in our children's eyes,  
or the pain in our own, from the isolation we've endured  
motivates us to ensure all people are given the opportunity  
to let the light in their eyes and hearts grow?  
Can our own longing for the warmth of community  
help us realize our greater responsibility,  
as we claim the power we do have to ensure a more just future?  
Will we awaken from our slumber?

There is another way to see Jonah's experience in the whale,  
really the opposite of the slave ship or solitary cell—  
a place of refuge and reflection, a sanctuary, a moment of transformation,  
which can ultimately lead to greater peace.  
Jonah prays in "the belly of a living being, right near its present, living, beating  
heart" (Yanklowitz p.54).  
Our drawing near to the living, beating heart of humanity  
is what this holiest of days is all about.  
See all children as your own, God says to Jonah as he mourns the gourd.  
See with Divine perspective and hold that moral vision  
each day as you work to redeem yourself and others.

We as a Temple must believe the potential is great now for such awakening, especially in this holiest of moments.

Here are some ways we are engaging in this sacred work as a community—

- 1) After our Civic Engagement Campaign, we will delve further into advocacy work with local and statewide partners who are committed to dismantling systemic racism.
  
- 2) To be most effective and authentic in this work beyond our walls, we are committed to working on how we support each other within our walls. Through a new Task Force, chaired by Temple member Ariana Cook, we will pursue our obligation to be an antiracist congregation. The Task Force will create a strategic plan carried out over the next several years addressing all areas of Temple life, including ways to support those who identify as Jews of Color and people of color.
  
- 3) You are invited to participate in or lead small group conversations on race—we will face truths of our history, what’s at stake in the present, and our responsibility as a Jewish community to change the future. We will grapple with a range of issues. Mass incarceration is one part of a puzzle, each manifestation of racial injustice essential to understand in order to see the whole system at work. Through text study, conversations in pairs and groups, through a number of modalities, including trainings with experts, we will deepen our understanding of our own bias, individually and collectively, and commit to change. This coming week, you will receive a congregational email from Temple with links to register.

Chief Executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis,  
Rabbi Hara Person, wrote the following poem:

The sea pushes back off the shore,  
Yielding to gravity with a sigh,  
Not a leaving but a letting go,  
A retreat into its own deep fullness.  
The sun relinquishing its hold on the sky  
Only to rise once more at daybreak  
As the tide rolls back in,  
A different kind of letting go,  
An unspooling across the expanse,  
And we creatures of the earth are granted a fresh start,  
A chance to gather the debris  
And shape a whole new world.

On this Kol Nidre eve, we are called to account.  
By the voices of the past--Martha King's grandmother and countless others—  
by the present voices, Marquieth Jackson,  
of people hidden away from the light of day—  
by our own longing to be close to the beating heart of the world.  
The tides move with an eternal rhythm,  
as the cycles of human suffering continue.  
But together, we enter the deep –  
waters of freedom, a sea of redemption,  
the hope and the work of a whole new world.