

YOM KIPPUR 5776
WHEN TRAUMA WON'T LET GO
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I spent a lot of time this summer thinking about Caitlyn Jenner.

It seems to me that the widespread public acceptance—adulation, even—of the transgender former Olympic gold medalist turned reality-TV celebrity, says a lot about America in 2015 and the current fluidity of identity, the freedom to construct for ourselves our own reality unfettered by the onetime prisons of biology or societal norms. As my friend Rabbi Seth Limmer observes, “People experiment with identity today in ways that are unprecedented: a person born as a male Methodist in Minnesota can easily grow up to be [a] New York Jewish woman.”¹

A recent *New Yorker* cartoon perfectly captures the zeitgeist: A man in the produce aisle stares quizzically at a

¹ “Reform Judaism for the 21st Century,” June 6, 2015, as cited at www.chicagosinai.org.

piece of fruit. “It’s a pluot,” his wife explains. “An apricot that self-identifies as a plum.”²

Certainly we Reform Jews can find much to celebrate in this. After all, our Reform Jewish heritage enshrines autonomous choice as the hallmark of a meaningful spiritual life. We observe Judaism on our own terms. So identity as a choice and our religion of choice ought to go hand in hand.

But aren’t there factors that shape our experience of the world over which we have no choice? We do not enter this world with a blank slate. Our choices may defy nurture and even nature, but they cannot escape these forces altogether.

Our Torah reading for the Day of Atonement describes a kind of swearing-in ceremony between God and the people. Consider this curious sentence: “*Not only with you who are standing here today, do I make this covenant and this oath, but also with those who are not here with us today.*”³

Who, exactly, are “those who are not here with us today?” RaSHI and the majority of Biblical commentators

² E. Flake, *The New Yorker*, August 3, 2015. p. 33.

³ Deuteronomy 29:14.

point to future generations. But couldn't it mean past generations? Think of all the parents and grandparents and great-grandparents who used to sit here, as surely as you do. Are they not part of us today?

I mean this more literally than you may think. I mean that our ancestors' imprint resides *within us*.

Starting with our genes. It should not surprise you, given Judaism's time-honored reverence for scientific inquiry, that the Babylonian Talmud expresses a fascination with questions of biological inheritance. The first recorded case history of a genetically transmitted disease, hemophilia, is cited in the Talmud⁴, and the Talmud makes recommendations about suitable marriage partners based on heredity.⁵

Maybe this fascination is coded in our Jewish DNA, because today, fifteen centuries after the completion of the Talmud, Jewish scientists are pioneering the new fields of *epigenetics* and the intergenerational transmission of trauma,

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 64b.

⁵ *Ibid*, as cited in Harvey Babich, "Biblical and Talmudic Human Genetics," YU Torah Online, May 14, 2014.

which explore how the traumatic experiences of one generation can actually lodge in the bodies and psyches of subsequent generations.

A veteran returning from the hell of war; a survivor of rape, a mugging, or a violent accident—such people predictably report of their traumatic experience, “it changed me.” The field of epigenetics gives us the knowledge to say that, in fact, it did. From studying people who suffer PTSD, we know that traumatic experiences lodge physiologically; epigenetics is now demonstrating that these physiological changes can actually be passed on to the next generation.

Research backs this up. “When rats or mice are put under duress, particularly during early development, their second and third generation offspring exhibit behavioral irregularities.”⁶ In one recent experiment, scientists trained laboratory mice to fear the smell of acetophenone, a chemical with a fragrance like cherries and almonds. The researchers wafted the scent around a small chamber while giving small electric shocks to male mice. The animals learned to

⁶ Inna Gaisler-Salomon, “Inheriting Stress,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2014.

associate the fragrance with pain, shuddering in the presence of the smell even when the shock was not administered. This fear reaction was passed on to their offspring and even the third generation—the “grandchildren” of the lab mice—who also shuddered at the chemical fragrance even though they never had been exposed to the pain. The fact that the original test subjects were male makes the study all the more remarkable, as it rules out transmission through parenting, which in mice comes primarily from the mother.⁷

A molecule produced in the body’s response to stress may actually end up affecting one’s genetic code, making the altered “wiring” susceptible to inheritance.

“Studies suggest that genocides in Rwanda, Nigeria, Cambodia, Armenia and the former Yugoslavia have brought about distinct psychopathological symptoms in the offspring of survivors.”⁸ Another example: children conceived during the harsh wartime famine in the Netherlands in the 1940s are, today, at increased risk for diabetes, heart disease, and

⁷ Paraphrasing B.G. Dias & K.J. Ressler, *Nature Neurosci* as cited on www.nature.com, December 1, 2013.

⁸ Inna Gaisler-Salomon, “Inheriting Stress,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2014.

other conditions—possibly because of epigenetic alterations to their genes.⁹

Examination of second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors, conducted by neuroscientist Rachel Yehuda of Mt. Sinai Medical Center, found that “Holocaust offspring were three times more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder... than demographically similar Jewish persons whose parents did not survive the Holocaust.” They even exhibited the same hormonal abnormalities as actual survivors.¹⁰

Last fall the *New Republic* brought attention to

Yael Danieli, the author of an influential reference work on the multigenerational dimensions of trauma, [who] refers to the physical transmission of the horrors of the past as “embodied history.” Of course, biological legacy doesn’t predetermine the personality or health of any one child. To say that

⁹ B.T. Heijmans *et al.*, *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* 105, 17046-17049 (2008), as cited on www.nature.com, December 1, 2013.

¹⁰ As interviewed on *On Being with Krista Tippett*, July 30, 2015. Transcript archived at www.onbeing.org.

would be to grossly oversimplify the socioeconomic and geographic and irreducibly personal forces that shape a life. At the same time, it would be hard to overstate the political import of these new findings. People who have been subject to repeated, centuries-long violence, such as African Americans and Native Americans, may by now have disadvantage baked into their very molecules.¹¹

For second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors, these findings surely resonate. Others sitting here today are children of abuse, or children of the abused. These fields of study may give you new language to understand yourselves and your families. Knowledge of how trauma crosses generations may become a source of power and resilience, allowing descendants of victims to reassert control over their lives and destinies.

Today I'd like us to consider the intergenerational transmission of trauma as an important new lens for

¹¹ Judith Shulevitz, "The Science of Suffering," *New Republic*, November 16, 2014.

understanding the condition of African Americans in this country, and understanding this moment in the history of the Jewish people, specifically in this 70th year after the end of the Holocaust.

This summer, the Reform Movement joined the NAACP on an 860-mile march from Selma, Alabama, to Washington, DC. America's Journey for Justice highlighted an advocacy agenda to protect the right of every American to a fair criminal justice system, uncorrupted and unfettered access to the ballot box, sustainable jobs with a living wage, and equitable public education.

More than 50 years after Martin Luther King prophesied, "I Have a Dream," more than 60 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* desegregated the schools, we still have to reckon with the pervasive legacy of institutionalized racism against America's people of color.

Police brutality; urban blight; inadequate education; a criminal justice system, industrial prison complex, and death penalty all disproportionately aggressive toward America's

Black population—these are not aberrant or transitory features of our society; they are part of the American legacy. The rising chant “Black Lives Matter” matters now, because for too long and in too many ways, Black lives haven’t.

In the searing new memoir “Between the World and Me,” Ta-Nehisi Coates¹², who writes for *The Atlantic*, conveys the historic and still-unwritten trauma inflicted on America’s Black population.

The American Dream, argues Coates, with its vision of placid suburbs and easy living, has been attained through a combination of policies, laws and American traditions that institutionalize Black disadvantage; neglect of urban neighborhoods where Black people live in near-constant struggle with poverty, drugs, crime and ingrained fear, fear almost as birthright; and, above all, through the plunder of black bodies—from slavery, through mob violence, lynchings, violent suppression of peaceful protesters, right on through brutality exercised with impunity today.

¹² The name is pronounced counterintuitively: “Tah-neh-HA-see.”

In this grim appraisal, “[t]he plunder of black life was drilled into this country in its infancy and reinforced across its history, so that plunder has become an heirloom... a default setting to which, likely to the end of our days, we must invariably return.”¹³ “In America,” he concludes, “it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage*.”¹⁴

If these words shock or disturb you—you are in good company. My defenses went right up. I thought about my Black friends from college, from Greater Centennial AME Zion Church in Mt. Vernon and the nearby Edward Williams School where so many WRT congregants volunteer—and I said to myself, “yes, but this is not about me; this is not *our* story.”

But then I thought about the Black neighborhood five minutes from where I trained to become a rabbi starting 20 years ago, at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, a then-squalid, crackhouse-infested ghetto where White people would dare not walk, even in broad daylight; and I thought

¹³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015. p. 111.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 103.

about the nine Black people gunned down by a White supremacist this summer in Charleston at their Church Bible Study; and I thought about Black schoolchildren in Rockland County deprived of education and opportunity by a rapacious (and, as we know, predominantly Orthodox Jewish) school board, and I thought about those voters in Georgia—mostly poor, mostly Black—who will find it harder to get to the ballot box this November because of new redistricting procedures; and I thought about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who said “that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”¹⁵

And then I thought: how is this *not* about me? How is this *not* our story? How much am I—how much are we—products of a system, participants in a system, that profits many at the cost of some?

¹⁵ “The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,” 1972, as quoted in Susannah Heschel, ed., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1996. pp. 224-226.

Applying the idea of generationally transmitted trauma to an entire people, it becomes easier to understand how the more than 350 years of the Atlantic slave trade—longer than the years since Emancipation by two centuries—to say nothing of institutionalized racism from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Movement, have left a lasting legacy of injury upon the Black body and the collective Black psyche, where such trauma has surely lodged.

It's okay—necessary, really—to feel shocked and disturbed on Yom Kippur. Is this not the point of the Day of Atonement—this uncomfortable fast, this beating of the chest, this deliberate self-abasement: to rouse us from slumber, to shake off complacency, to shift our perspective? I have no sweeping action plan to propose—only that we might resolve, this Yom Kippur, to engage more seriously the questions at the heart of racial inequality in America, in our homes, in our synagogue, in our multiracial Westchester community.

Here at WRT we have initiated conversation with local Black clergy about creating and expanding days for shared faith and fellowship, in the spirit of our joyful annual gathering with our friends from Mount Vernon on the Shabbat of Martin Luther King weekend. Additionally, please take an informational card about new discriminatory voting practices so that you can urge members of Congress to support the Voting Rights Advancement Act¹⁶, which would help restore protections against these restrictive laws.

Because a legacy—deeply embodied though it may be—need not endure forever. Legacies—whether triumphant or traumatic—require upkeep, maintenance, reinforcement in each successive generation. A generations-old trauma need not be re-inflicted on the next generation. But dismantling a traumatic legacy requires unflinching vision and commitment.

I think we Jews may possess an acute, even unique, capacity to empathize and join in this effort because of our own history of trauma. The Torah itself inculcates our

¹⁶ S. 1659 / H.R. 2867

identity as a traumatized people, the descendants of slaves to the tyrannical hierarchies of the Egyptian empire that made human beings into property, cheap machines for building cities of stored-up grain and treasure. We deliberately, ritually invoke this primordial trauma—and its redemptive coda—every time we gather at a Passover Seder and say: “In every generation, we must see ourselves as personally having gone forth from Egypt.”¹⁷

We, the Jewish People, would endure countless other nightmarish ordeals: the destruction of the Temple, memorialized endlessly in our literature and prayers and the somber fast of *Tisha B'Av*; subjugation, forced conversion, Inquisition, mass expulsion, decimation, intimidation, discrimination, extermination.

Children and grandchildren of the Holocaust, in particular, bear the unmistakable imprints of generationally transmitted trauma. How telling that we call them “second and third generation *survivors*” even though they, personally, never experienced the Nazi horror. They carry it within.

¹⁷ Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 116b, as cited in the *Haggadah shel Pesach*.

But are we not all, in some sense, heirs to this painful legacy? I do not mean to dilute the experience of actual survivors by comparing their psychic and physical wounds to the vulnerability every Jew feels in a post-Holocaust world. I do, however, mean to suggest that, in general, it has become impossible for Jews to view our world without filtering it through the trauma of the Shoah.

This makes sense: in “Jewish time,” 70 years is not long. Actual survivors still walk among us. Because the day will come—in my lifetime by all predictions—that the last eyewitness to the Shoah will die, I have made it a priority of my rabbinate to give every Jewish child an opportunity to interact with Shoah survivors. I have made it a priority of WRT’s Religious School to have children study the Holocaust and human rights as they become Bar and Bat Mitzvah, a change that will be reflected in this year’s seventh grade curriculum. And I have personally undertaken to educate college-bound seniors about the opportunities and threats they may face on campus, especially the growing

Boycott, Divestment, & Sanctions (BDS) movement. The goal is not to traumatize the next generation but rather to give them tools to confront resurgent anti-Semitism and to cultivate in them a revulsion to prejudice, an empathy for all victims of discrimination, and an unrelenting commitment to oppose genocide against any of God's children.

When our uniquely Jewish generationally transmitted trauma sends us out into the world to pursue justice; when it carves out in our soul a reservoir of mercy and compassion for the dispossessed; when it girds us with a deeper awareness not only of Jewish vulnerability but Jewish resilience, then it can become a shield of strength for us, for our children, for generations to come.

But there is a dark side to our having internalized the Holocaust, a dark side to re-living and transmitting our victimhood. My next door neighbor and colleague up the road at Kol Ami, Rabbi Shira Milgrom, relates:

I was present on a Yom Kippur morning many years ago when Rabbi Harold Schulweis asked his congregation if they could name members of Hitler's SS. And the names came pouring out from all corners of the sanctuary: Himmler, Eichmann, Goering, and on. And then Rabbi Schulweis asked the community to name the people who tried to save Anne Frank and her family. Silence.... In focusing on our suffering, we have chosen to see ourselves as victims, to see in others the potential hater. For so many of us, being Jewish is bound up in being vulnerable.

I worry about what wearing our victimhood almost as a badge of pride does to our collective Jewish psyche. This especially has come to the fore in our collective processing of the Iran Deal. As you heard me say last week, I have grave concerns about how this deal endangers Israel's security. But to compare the agreement with Iran to the Holocaust

obscures the real strategic flaws in the Deal, diminishes and thereby dishonors the mechanized murder of millions at the hands of the Nazis, and promotes a counterproductive hysteria in place of a substantive conversation.

And I worry about bequeathing this heritage of trauma and victimhood to the next generation. What kind of legacy are we leaving our children by teaching them to look for bogeymen around every corner? As Rabbi Donniel Hartman has said concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: *The contest over who's the bigger victim is a contest I hope never to win!*¹⁸ We do ourselves and our descendants no favors by adopting the mantle of History's victim. By so doing we turn our trauma from a liberating tool into a noose around our necks.

And we diminish the magnificent legacy that Judaism would implore us to leave the next generation—in all its breathtaking complexity, its wisdom and wonder, its moral splendor and intellectual sophistication. As a rabbi, my greatest fear is not that our children will grow up unprepared to confront resurgent anti-Semitism but that they will grow

¹⁸ Paraphrasing Rabbi Donniel Hartman, "Fighting A Just War Against Hamas Justly," January 13, 2009.

up to be uninformed, uninspired, uninterested about their Jewish heritage.

I adore my Jewish heritage and I bless my ancestors who passed down to me the glow of Shabbat candles, the sweetness of apples and honey, the unfathomable depths of our literature, our questing spirit for the holy, our embrace of science and truth and poetry, our pioneering passion to settle new lands and reclaim Zion as our own, our glorious food and music, our intolerance of cruelty and the impulse to defend the vulnerable that pulses within the Jew like the very beat of the heart, our prayers—rising, out of the depths of human experience, to the loftiest aspirations of humankind.

This is the Judaism I love, the Judaism I have devoted my life to sharing with you.

Not only with you who are standing here today, do I make this covenant and this oath, but also with those who are not here with us today.¹⁹

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 29:14.

Yes, our ancestors—all they endured, all they accomplished, and all they bequeathed—stand among us, here, today.

But do not forget: our future generations also stand among us, here, today.

What legacy are we leaving them?