

A New American Dream

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Friday, September 18, 2020 / *Erev 1 Tishrei 5781 (Erev Rosh Hashanah)*

On a recent Friday morning, on my drive home from a funeral in Queens, I decided to make an unplanned stop in Flushing, to visit the old neighborhood where my dad grew up in the Pomonok housing projects. Subsidized by the City of New York, Pomonok provided many Ashkenazi Jewish families at mid-century with affordable housing -- a stepping stone between the tenements of the Lower East Side and the leafy suburban neighborhood of my childhood. Every time I visit Pomonok, I feel grounded in my family's story -- how my ancestors came here with very little, and slowly, over four generations, we rose and were able to achieve the American Dream.

And yet, every time I visit the Pomonok housing projects, I feel a certain unease -- a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, a sense that the story that I so cherish about America is somehow incomplete. Alongside my family's American Dream, there is another, harsher story -- the brutal story of American racism. While my ancestors arrived here to the Statue of Liberty, the ancestors of many African American families arrived to the slave auction block. While my family has experienced four generations of upward mobility, many African American families have experienced four centuries of ongoing oppression.

Conversations about race can be particularly difficult for Ashkenazi Jews. Our identity in America is rife with internal conflict: we are at once a minority, outsiders, a community on the margins; and yet, we have successfully integrated into seemingly every sphere of American life. We have at once found in this country greater safety and security than any other Jewish community in history; and yet, anti-Semitism is on the rise here. We struggle to reconcile the fact of our white skin with our centuries of pain and oppression.

More than 50 years ago, James Baldwin wrote: "It contradicts the American dream to suggest that any gratuitous ... horror can happen here." But the truth is, gratuitous horror has been happening here since long before Trayvon Martin was killed, long before Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, and George Floyd -- all the way back to the very beginnings of our nation.

How are we to understand these two contrasting realities: the promise of the American Dream, and the horror of the American Nightmare?

On Rosh Hashanah, we are commanded to hear the sound of the shofar -- a sound that the Medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides compared to a wake up call. He heard in the sound of the shofar a wordless voice, crying out: "Awake, you sleepers, from your sleep; arise, you slumberers, from your slumber." He heard in the sound of the shofar a call -- to open our eyes

as wide as possible, to see a reality that exists beyond the comfortable world of our own dreams.

What might we learn if we heed that call -- if we tell our own Ashkenazi Jewish story alongside the story of American racism? What might we discover about the American Dream?

Like the blast of a shofar, the horn of a steamship bellows as it enters New York Harbor. Among its passengers are some of the 2.5 million Ashkenazi Jews who, with extraordinary bravery, left their countries of origin at the turn of the 20th century in order to seek a better life in the United States -- including my own great-grandparents, and maybe yours as well. They were "the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free." They left behind in the Old Country their villages, their parents, their grinding poverty, and the pain of having been Europe's archetypal outsider. They brought with them to the New World the Yiddish theatre, their socialist ideals, their grandmother's recipes, their grandfather's prayer shawl.

They found work wherever they could: sewing dresses in the garment district, selling pickles from a pushcart, baking pastries at a kosher bakery, hanging wallpaper. They saved their money to enjoy life's simple pleasures. In the Old Country, a roasted chicken had been a rare delicacy -- a special weekly treat reserved for the Shabbat dinner table. But here in the Land of Opportunity, they lived with the spirit of abundance -- stacking the meats on their deli sandwiches so high that they could scarcely take a bite.

But their lives were not easy. Many of them lived in crowded tenement houses on the Lower East Side. They were looked down upon by America's White Protestant elite -- seen as filth, a foreign influence that was changing the country for the worse.

They watched, in 1924, as the US shut its door to further Jewish immigration. They watched as colleges and universities placed quotas on Jewish enrollment -- creating an ethos in higher education of the more exclusive, the more desirable. And most painfully, they watched from afar, helpless, as six million Jews were systematically murdered by the Nazis -- and agonized over their American Dream and their cousins' European nightmare.

After the war, things began to change. On account of the horror that had unfolded in Europe, anti-Semitism in America became taboo -- was forced underground and relegated to the fringes of society. Meanwhile, through the GI Bill, the federal government provided many Ashkenazi Jewish families with subsidies -- so that they could afford to go college and buy a home.¹ Many of those whose parents had only finished high school now became doctors and lawyers. Many

¹ For more on this topic, see: Brodkin Sacks, Karen. "How Did Jews Become White Folks." *Race*. Edited by Gregory, Steven and Roger Sanjek. | Additionally, see: Goldstein, Eric. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*.

of those whose parents had lived in the tenements now bought a family car and moved out to the leafy suburbs.

Since then, Ashkenazi Jews have continued to thrive. We have risen high in the ranks of government, built hospitals and established universities, and left an indelible mark on American music, theatre, and film. We have utilized our resources to fight for just causes -- for civil rights and for Soviet Jewry. We have instilled in our children our fervent belief in the American Dream -- that, although our ancestors may have come from modest beginnings, with a good education, hard work, and a strong moral compass, we believe that our children can achieve anything.

And yet, there is one dimension of our success story that has often been overlooked. Without our intending to do so, and largely, without our even noticing it, in the century that has passed since our ancestors first arrived here, something shifted in the American psyche that caused this country to see Ashkenazi Jews as White people.² The ethnic differences that at first made us stand out were eventually washed away -- unable to withstand the starker racial contrast upon which America insists: a strict dichotomy between people with white skin and people with black or brown skin. For centuries, we had been Europe's archetypal outsider. But by the time our ancestors arrived on these shores, America already had its archetypal Other, who had lived here for centuries in pain.

Like the wail of a shofar, the cry of an enslaved woman pierces the air as her child is torn from her arms. She is one among the 600,000 people who were brought to this country in chains. They were sold on auction blocks, alongside furniture and cattle. They could not legally marry, were barred from learning to read, could not gather in private groups, and were forbidden from owning anything. They were the property of their enslavers, to be treated however they wished. They were legally tortured, whipped, raped, and killed.

By the time America declared its independence, slavery had been here for more than 150 years. The birth of our nation crystallized a blatant hypocrisy -- of at once proclaiming a person's unalienable right to liberty while simultaneously enslaving 20% of the population. This hypocrisy is baked into the Constitution -- which declares that enslaved people count as only three-fifths of a person, that enslaved people are somehow less than fully human.

This grotesque American myth is so deeply ingrained in our national subconscious that, every time we make advances against it, it keeps coming back in new forms. After the abolition of slavery, the brief period of Reconstruction [brought](#) unprecedented progress: the election of Black politicians to congress, the establishment of a free public school system -- giving many poor Americans, regardless of race, their first opportunity to learn to read and write.

² Again, for more on this topic, see: Brodkin Sacks, Karen. "How Did Jews Become White Folks." | Additionally, see: Goldstein, Eric. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*.

But these advances were only short lived. They were met with a sprawling new system of segregation, and a vicious resurgence of racist terror -- with lynchings [more than once a week](#) for 75 years. As W. E. B. Du Bois put it:³ "The slave went free; stood for a brief moment in the sun; and then moved back again toward slavery."

This pattern would repeat itself in the 20th century. With extraordinary bravery, the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement successfully dismantled the Jim Crow regime. It seemed that there had been a moment of reckoning in America -- that the country was finally waking up to our history of racial oppression.

But the promise of the Civil Rights Era was never fully realized. The racial oppression of the Jim Crow era did not disappear; rather, it changed forms. Today, Black Americans suffer disproportionately from the plague of mass incarceration. [By a wide margin](#), the United States incarcerates more people per capita than any other nation in the world -- with Black Americans [five times more likely](#) than White Americans to be imprisoned. This disparity is linked not to greater criminality, but rather, to differences in how White and Black people are policed.

Our ongoing scourge of police brutality against Black Americans is the most gruesome expression of the problem -- but it indeed runs much deeper than that. For example, White and Black Americans are proportionately equal in their drug usage, but Black Americans are [twice as likely](#) to be incarcerated for it. This disproportionate burden has ripple effects: even after being released from prison, many formerly incarcerated people will find themselves [ineligible](#) to apply for a student loan, [barred](#) from public housing, and in many states, will [lose their right to vote](#).

The unequal way in which our criminal justice system affects Black Americans is just the latest expression of American racism. A system that is supposed to protect us all has instead warped into a system that endangers the lives of many -- an injustice that scholar Michelle Alexander has described as [The New Jim Crow](#).

Each of these two stories tells a truth about America: the story of Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants who came to this country in search of a better future, and the story of enslaved Africans who were brought to this country by force. There are, of course, many other American stories -- of indigenous people, of Puritans, of suffragettes, of war veterans, of the DREAMers. The American story is all of these: each of them reveals some aspect of the truth, and none of them is fully complete without the others.

There is a certain danger that comes from acknowledging only one story -- an absolutism that mistakes a limited picture of reality for the whole truth. What's more, there is a positive benefit

³ DuBois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America*. p. 30

that comes from putting two stories into conversation with one another -- a productive tension that challenges our assumptions and broadens our field of vision.

Hearing the Ashkenazi Jewish story told alongside the story of American racism leaves us with a complex and uncomfortable truth: in the United States, Ashkenazi Jews are simultaneously outsiders and White people. This unusual identity at once causes us to feel uneasy in conversations about race, and yet, it might also compel us, perhaps even more so than other groups, to join in the fight for racial justice.

How we are to do so is not at all obvious. No one party or ideology has an exclusive claim to the truth. There are smart and compassionate people from all across the political spectrum who have differing and good ideas about the best path forward. In the fight for racial justice, there is no simple answer. There are many; and pursuing them will be difficult; and still, we must commit to them.

We might start by further educating ourselves about Whiteness -- about how that category has evolved over time to include Ashkenazi Jews. We should pay special attention to our own discomfort -- but not let that discomfort be a barrier to getting involved in the work.

We might further [educate](#) ourselves on the role that racism has played in this country: how it has shaped every moment in American history, and is baked into every policy issue in contemporary American life -- from healthcare to education, from income inequality to the spread of the pandemic.

We might realize that racial justice leaders are asking not merely for signs that say Black Lives Matter -- but rather, that our country conduct itself in such a way that we demonstrate⁴ through our laws and our actions that Black lives matter. Protests and marches have their place -- but if they are not backed by the much harder work of identifying specific policy changes and advocating for them, then our protests and marches alone will have served little beyond allaying our own feelings of guilt.

We might [support](#) initiatives [that](#) are [led](#) by [Jews](#) of [color](#)⁵ -- who [comprise](#) 12% of American Jewry, but who are vastly underrepresented in Jewish communal institutions, like synagogues. We should remember that the fight for racial justice is not about someone else's community, but rather, is also about our own.

We might learn to speak openly and honestly with our children about race -- treating it not as a taboo subject that we anxiously brush under the rug, but rather, acknowledging it as a part of our society that we can face and engage with. Many of us grew up learning that it was polite to

⁴ See: Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. Chapters 16 & 17: "Failure" & "Success."

⁵ A group that includes Black Jews, Jews from Latin and South America, Jews of Middle Eastern origin, and others.

try to see beyond race -- when in fact, not only is that impossible, it also willfully ignores the reality that people with different color skin often have different experiences in this country.

We might discover that it is absolutely critical that we show up to the work of racial justice specifically as Jews. Today, bigotries of all kinds are on the rise, including anti-Semitism and racism. These two hatreds are two sides of the same coin.⁶ This is why the marchers in Charlottesville were carrying both Nazi and Confederate flags. Both hatreds seek easy scapegoats for society's problems: anti-Semitism, by conjuring fears that Jews control society from top -- and racism, by conjuring fears that people of color drain society from the bottom. To effectively fight one, we must also commit to fighting the other. If we would want others to join us in the fight against anti-Semitism, then we must be similarly prepared to join the coalition in the fight against racism. This is not to say that we fight against racism out of our own self-interest. Rather, we do it because we all too painfully know what happens when no one shows up for the fight.

None of these things will be easy. In fact, they will be very hard. The only way that we can even begin to approach them is by working together. For this reason, WRT is launching a new Racial Justice Working Group, about which you can learn more by contacting our office. We will need each other in this work -- need each other to bring our ideas, our energy, our questions, our skepticism, our life experience, our commitment to work together, even when the conversation makes us feel uncomfortable.

Whenever I visit the neighborhood where my dad grew up, in the Pomonok housing projects, I feel not only a deep connection to my family's American story; I feel not only a certain unease that that story is incomplete; I feel something else as well. I feel a deep and abiding belief in the possibility of the American Dream: not the dream of upward mobility; not the kind of dream in which our eyes are closed to other people's American story; not the kind of dream from which the sound of the shofar must wake us; but rather, a new kind of American Dream.

The New American Dream hopes not that each successive generation might rise higher and achieve more than the last, not that our children might do better than we have, but rather, that they might be better: that they might be better citizens, that they might be better and braver participants in our national conversation about race, that they might be better equipped to build a more just and equitable society -- that, through our children, our country might be better than it has been in the past.

The New American Dream, in fact, is not a dream at all. It is an awakening. The shofar blasts. Will we hear it?

⁶ For more on this topic, see: Kivel, Paul. "I'm Not White, I'm Jewish: Standing as Jews in the Fight for Racial Justice."