



and opinions with which we are likely to agree. This narrowed perspective leads us to be experts in our own views—with easy access to “facts” that reinforce what we already believe to be true.

It is becoming more and more rare to encounter other people who do not share our beliefs. And when we do, we, as a society, have forgotten how to behave. We no longer know how to see the full person in front of us—a fellow traveler whose different life experiences have led them to perceive things differently. Instead of being interested, instead of leaning into our discomfort to hear some of their story, we enter fight-or-flight mode, and either engage aggressively or disengage altogether.

But this is the season of awakenings. What if, instead of reacting to the other with fear, we responded with curiosity? What if our perception of difference from the human being standing in front of us—either on a screen or actually in the flesh—motivated us to really try to see one another, in all of our complexity. Honoring our shared humanity while celebrating our diversity.

Sometimes awakenings happen gradually, over time, as with Jake Sully in *Avatar*. Sometimes the veil is lifted all at once. This kind of awakening can be painful, as we confront the effects of our former slumber.

A few weeks ago many of us experienced this latter kind of sudden and painful awakening, as we saw the picture of little Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach. It was an awful moment of seeing. And I cried as I listened to Scott Simon, on NPR:

“Some pictures produce thousands — sometimes millions — of words. This week, it was the image of a little boy in a red shirt and little rubber-soled shoes lying in the waves of a Turkish beach. You may hope the boy is just napping after he's played. His clothes look neat. He looks cared for and loved. But the little boy — it's difficult even to say this — is dead.”

Simon went on to say, “This week the little boy on the beach came to signify thousands who have died trying to escape the everyday of bombs, shooting, and starvation of life in Syria, and other conflicts. The frail body of a boy shouldn't have to do that. There has been so much fine, vivid reporting about the thousands of lives that have been lost, the millions uprooted, and the many who now camp in foreign train stations or tramp over highways. But we can grow numb to numbers. One little boy can be a human story...But a lot of things grab for our attention...We look, and feel, then look away, to go on with the lives we have right in front of us. Until the sight of a little boy on a beach reminds us that looking away can cost lives, too.”

A season of awakenings. Time to open our hearts to the humanity of our fellows. “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed,” we will read this afternoon, from the Book of Leviticus. But in this globalized world, who is my neighbor? If I begin to awaken to the stories and suffering of all people, even those across the world, I am quickly overwhelmed. So let's look closer to home.

On Tisha B'Av--Judaism's communal day of mourning many tragedies that have befallen our people just because of who we are--a number of us gathered at Beth El to hear the stories of some of the members of our community who have faced challenges and suffered because of the color of their skin. We were also joined by John James, a community organizer in Oakland, who shared some of his childhood memories of encounters with the police in East Oakland. He remembers being a little boy, playing with his neighborhood friends, at an age when children don't know that the color of their skin has any greater significance than the number of fingers they have on their hands, or the curve of their ears. Their play was interrupted by an officer who made them line up in the middle of the street and strip naked.

We like to think that this kind of othering, this dehumanizing, is limited to a few bad apples, or that these kinds of encounters between people of color and law enforcement are a thing of the past. But this is the season of awakenings. The shofar calls on us to shake off our self-soothing blindness. To see that this is not just about a few bad apples, and certainly not only about law enforcement. This is about all

of us. No matter the color of our skin, we all carry often unconscious beliefs and expectations about people who are different from us.

John James and our own Beth El members, all people of color, shared other stories—being followed around by shop owners as they perused merchandise, watching fellow pedestrians, also walking alone, cross to the other side of the street at night, being overlooked and not taken seriously in their professional arenas. The tension of living with multiple identities, connected to multiple communities, while still trying to live one unified life. It is time to wake up. Racism is not being perpetrated by a few bigoted and ignorant people far away. It is right here. In each of us. Buried deep in our own unconscious and implicit bias, embedded in the structures and the systems of our society. The structures and systems from which some of us benefit, and as a result of which some of us suffer.

Dr. Peggy McIntosh wrote, “As a white person, I realized that I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn’t affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see ‘whiteness’ as a racial identity. In my class and place, I did not recognize myself as a racist because I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.”

A season of awakenings. Finding the courage to face our unconscious and implicit bias, coming to terms with our role in our racially imbalanced society, seeing the full humanity of our neighbors who are beneficiaries or victims of these systems—all of this is big, and maybe frightening. An awakening like this challenges the status quo.

But we are the Jewish people. We are a bold and courageous people. We are the original inheritors of the prophetic tradition, and people with a history of raising our voices and using our power for justice. It is time once again to heed Jeremiah’s call to go down to the halls of power and deliver the message of our tradition, to “...Do what is just and right...do not wrong the stranger...and do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place.”

On this day of all days, when, for our haftarah reading this morning, we recite God’s words through the prophecy of Isaiah, let us not just be moved by his words, let us be moved to action. “Raise your voice like a ram’s horn! Declare to My people their transgression...Is such the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies?...Do you call that a fast...? No, this is the fast I desire: to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.”

Not to ignore our own kin. Not just our immediate family members. Not only our most cherished friends nor only the members of our closest communities. When we open ourselves to seeing the humanity in all people, even the stranger becomes kin. We mourn the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Walter Scott. We get inside the devastation and grief of their mothers and fathers, their sisters and brothers. We see them. And we don’t just feel for them, we feel with them.

In a flash of awakening I realize that my two beloved young children will never face the kind of fear that John James experiences when he sees a police car. Their skin is white. And I am heartbroken, getting inside the extra parenting that my peers of color have to do, in order to train their children in the different set of rules by which they have to play in order to stay safe. I am shocked, as a proud Californian, that we live in the state in which more people have been killed by police than in any other state in the US.

Author Debby Irving wrote, “As I’ve swapped childhood stories with people of color, I’ve learned the ways in which many parents of color prepare their children for a hostile world. Trying to protect children with a worry-free childhood is a privilege of the dominant class—a white privilege. Many parents of color teach their children to keep their hands in plain sight if a police officer is near and to avoid white neighborhoods in order to avoid being questioned for simply being there. In the same way I was trained to make myself visible and seek opportunity, many children of color are trained to stay under the radar.”

It is time to wake up. To move from reading the headlines and feeling, to reading the headlines and acting. This call to see the full humanity of others who are different from us echoes through the millennia of Jewish tradition.

“A Jew must be sensitive to the pain of all human beings,” taught Elie Wiesel, “A Jew cannot remain indifferent to human suffering, whether...[in other countries] or in our own cities and towns. The mission of the Jewish people has never been to make the world more Jewish, but to make it more human.”

This year, let us answer the shofar’s call. Right now, a critical anti-racial profiling bill is sitting on Governor Jerry Brown’s desk. Having passed both the Assembly and Senate, the fate of this necessary piece of legislation is in your hands. Will you raise your voice like the shofar and call on our Governor to sign this legislation? Take the bright yellow card you found at your seat home with you, and take action tonight, as soon as the sun sets. Break your fast with this act of justice for our state.

Before you even leave the building this morning, you have an opportunity to—at least figuratively—heed Jeremiah’s call to go down to the halls of power in our country, and to deliver a message. Notice the large card at your seat, with the picture of rabbis marching at the front of a procession, flanking Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., carrying a Torah and American flags. In the last month, more than 200 Reform rabbis—myself included—along with many members of our Reform congregations from across the country, wrote a new chapter of this story, marching with our partners in the NAACP from Selma to Washington DC, carrying a Torah every step of the way in the Southern August heat. We marched under the banner, “Our lives, our votes, our jobs, and our schools matter.” Turn that card over and fill in your information to support the Voting Rights Advancement Act. Then, before you leave Beth El today, drop your completed card into one of the large envelopes in the gallery marked, “Completed Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism Voting Rights Cards.” We will put our community’s collected cards altogether in a large package, and mail it to Washington D.C. There, the RAC staff will sort them, along with what we hope will be the thousands of cards from other Reform congregations across the country, and deliver them to the appropriate offices on Capitol Hill.

But these two actions—though critically important—are just the beginning. As we awaken to the humanity of our neighbors, of our own kin, as Isaiah reminds us, we have deeper work to do. We must carry the soul-searching work of this most sacred of days into each day of the coming year. We must “consider our deeds and turn away from our wrong ways and improper thoughts.” I invite you to join our member Ilana Kaufman and me at 2:30 this afternoon in the Beit Midrash for a Yom Kippur afternoon discussion group entitled “Finding My Voice—A Conversation About Racial Justice.” And if you can’t attend this discussion, we will be creating further opportunities for these kinds of conversations in the coming year. Please watch for more information in the Builder and E-Update.

This is the season of awakenings. As we emerge from our slumber, let us make this a year of justice, goodness, and blessing for all people. Kein y’hi ratson.