

Last May, on one of those beautiful spring nights we get far too rarely here in Philadelphia, I was walking in Elkins Park along Church Road, coming home from Walgreens and enjoying the air. As I neared Cheltenham Hills Drive, I noticed that a car was pulled over toward the side of the road, partly blocking traffic, hazards on. Concerned that the driver might be having a problem with the car, I crossed over and saw a young, African-American man standing at the front of the car looking under the hood and I asked if he needed a hand. He said his name was Ron and explained the car had just stalled out on him. He was looking at some of the connections and I had just offered to get in the car to try to start it while he fiddled under the hood. As we were talking, a police car pulled up alongside us and the officer rolled down his window to ask if everything was OK. I spoke up and explained that Ron's car had stalled and I was trying to help him. The officer put on his flashers so the stalled car would be more visible to other drivers and came over to talk with him. Glad that someone who could actually help was on hand – since I know absolutely nothing about cars – I wished Ron good luck and continued walking. It was only a little later, once I was home, that this thought occurred to me: Did Ron, as a young African-American man, feel the same sense of relief I had when the police car pulled over? Had I noticed him stiffen as the officer approached? Did he think of the police officer as someone who was there to give assistance, the way I did? Suddenly I felt ashamed – ashamed that I might have left this young man in an uncomfortable situation dealing with the officer on his own, ashamed that my thoughts went to such a dark and suspicious place about a police officer who was surely just trying to help, ashamed at the realization that my reaction as a white man to the police officer's arrival might, *might*, be so different from that of a person of color.

Fast forward to two weeks ago. The car of an unarmed forty-year old man named Terence Crutcher stalled in the middle of a road outside of Tulsa, Oklahoma. A passing police car stopped to investigate and then radioed for backup. Meanwhile, the white, female police officer pointed her gun at the man and told him to put his hands on his head. Why she felt the need to do this is unclear. What is clear, because it is captured on multiple police cameras, is that within thirty seconds of the police backup arriving, an unresisting Terence Crutcher had been first Tased and then shot dead. Shot dead with a bullet in the back once he was already down on the ground, incapacitated. When questioned, the officer stated she felt threatened and thought Crutcher was reaching for a weapon; no weapon was found either on his body or in the car.

The story of Terence Crutcher is horrifying, appalling, profoundly tragic, an outrage against our most basic sense of justice, of right and wrong. It is also only the latest example in a seemingly ceaseless litany of outrageous and horrifying events in the past twenty-four months that have led to African-American men dead at the hands of police – from Eric Garner, killed by an illegal chokehold in New York while being arrested for selling loose cigarettes; to Laquan McDonald, a Chicago man shot 16 times by a police officer arriving at a scene that other officers already had well under control; to Dontre Hamilton, a Milwaukee man with mental illness who was shot 14 times after police were called because he was making a disturbance; to Walter Scott, shot in the back in South Carolina by a police officer who had pulled him over for a broken brake light and then planted evidence by his bleeding body to make the shooting appear justified; to Freddie Gray, whose neck was broken while he was being driven in a Baltimore police van; to Alton Sterling, shot at close range by police officers in Baton Rouge while lying handcuffed on his back; to Philando Castile, shot in his car by police as he reached for his wallet after being pulled over in Minneapolis, bleeding to death while his girlfriend and her four-year old daughter watched from the back seat.

These stories, and so, so many others are simultaneously horrifying and numbing, a relentlessly unending litany, like the martyrology of Jewish victims of Roman persecution that's a part of our traditional Yom Kippur afternoon service. Like that recitation, the scope of this brutality only becomes concrete to us when we put names – Eric, Laquan, Dantre – and stories to the victims, instead of

conflating them into faceless statistics. It's no accident that we are aware of these deaths only thanks to footage from bystanders' cellphone videos and police body and dashboard cameras. These videos open a gruesome and harrowingly intimate window into these men's stories by showing us the final, wrenching moments of their lives, up close and unflinching. These videos reveal to our society as a whole the atrocities that are being perpetrated against young black men, while simultaneously highlighting that this story of brutality and abuse is nothing different, nothing new. What is new is the availability of footage and hard evidence, without which the circumstances of their deaths would have been first dismissed and then forgotten by all but their family and friends, if it had even come to general attention at all. If it weren't for this footage there is no way these deaths and so many others would have the profile that they do, would have captured the attention of the media and white America the way they have and, to be honest, I almost assuredly wouldn't be speaking today about this topic. The other thing these deaths have in common, of course, is police officers who were too ready to view these men as a threat and to react to the situations in which they found themselves with disproportionate force and lethal results.

Now it is not my intention to demonize police officers, the vast majority of whom are courageous, decent people who bravely put themselves in harm's way to keep us safe. Sometimes they are reviled by the very people they are trying to protect and, tragically, sometimes they are singled out and targeted because of that very job. My purpose this morning isn't to condemn the police; that would be both wrong – a dramatic oversimplification of the facts – and far too easy, laying the responsibility for the attitudes that shape how many perceive and understand race at somebody else's door. As Ta-Nehisi Coates observes in his moving and wrenching 2015 memoir *Between the World and Me*, talk of police reform “understate[s] the task and allows the citizens of this country to pretend that there is a real distance between their own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect them. The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country's criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority.” (p. 78-9)

We cannot outsource responsibility for discriminatory and oppressive practices to others – ever, but especially on this day when we are enjoined to ask searching and difficult questions about our attitudes and behaviors, both individually and collectively. On Rosh ha-Shanah we are commanded to examine our shortcomings and face hard truths in the service of striving for change, and one truth we need to face as Americans and Jews is that in 2016, more than 150 years after the abolition of slavery, people of color in general and African-American men in particular are systematically treated in this country as though they are worth less than others, both in conscious and unconscious ways by many Americans. The statistics surrounding the disproportionate rate of African-American interaction with the criminal justice system, rates of incarceration, low academic achievement and high school graduation rates and, absolutely, rates of fatal interactions with the police all reflect the implicit and subconscious biases and assumptions that many Americans – including me, including most of us here in this room, I would hazard to say – hold toward African-Americans.

It's not, God forbid, that we're racist or bigoted – I'm not racist, you're not racist. It's that our society perpetuates certain assumptions and attitudes about African-Americans – as hostile, as aggressive, paradoxically as lazy, often as physically gifted but academically lacking – that subliminally affect the way that white people perceive African-Americans – and often African-Americans perceive themselves – in subtle but important ways. These attitudes aren't confined to one deplorable segment of society – a recent Reuters poll revealed that 22% of *Clinton supporters* regard blacks as less intelligent than whites, 25% regard blacks as more lazy, and 31% regard them as more violent. And those assumptions cannot help but influence an encounter, a situation, an interaction, until they become self-reinforcing and self-fulfilling. A police officer who shoots because he thought the person he was dealing with was acting in a menacing way, or that the officer felt like he was being threatened? The officer

probably really *did* feel that way, even if there was nothing objectively threatening taking place in that particular encounter – in no small part because of the catalog of subliminal attitudes and associations we have around race that act as a prism through which white Americans approach our interactions with African-Americans. Would that same officer have felt threatened in the same situation, felt like she was in danger, escalated the situation and then reacted with lethal force if the person she encountered was white? Possibly, but the evidence suggests otherwise.

And what I have to say about police officers is equally true about many of us. A 2003 study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed, for example, that résumés with typically “white” names like Emily or Greg received callbacks at a 50% higher rate than the *identical* résumé sent by researchers for the same position with typically “black” names like Lakisha and Jamal. A 2014 study showed that a mistake-riddled legal memo was graded much more harshly by law partners when it supposedly came from an African-American associate, as compared with the identical memo supposedly written by a white one. The truth is, our implicit, subconscious attitudes subtly shape the way we regard and relate to African-Americans just as much as the police officers we read about and whose actions we genuinely deplore. An interactive project run through Harvard University and running since 1998 conclusively demonstrates that Americans across all ethnic, racial, and gender lines have an unconscious inclination to associate negative attributes with darker-skinned people and positive attributes with pictures of people with lighter skin. When I took the test online myself, I was deeply disturbed by what it revealed about my unconscious bias; the fact that this bias is nearly universal offered little consolation. These attitudes are so subconscious and ingrained that they can be difficult to identify, let alone counteract, even when we try. Our machzor declares, “You[, God,] know the universe’s mysteries, the most hidden secrets of all living beings. You search a person’s innermost recesses, and you probe the depths of conscience and of thought. Nothing is hidden from you, nothing is concealed before your gaze.” (p. 763) God knows more than we see; but if we are completely honest with ourselves, we may also be aware of more in ourselves than we want to see, than we are ordinarily willing to see. For, as the machzor states, “We are guilty, we have sinned.”

We have sinned – individually and collectively – when we fall into facile and erroneous assumptions about impoverished, often minority, communities and believe that residents there are victims of choices of their own making. When we assume that the reason African-Americans are disproportionately incarcerated is because they commit more crimes. When we fail to recognize how a history of oppression has created a legacy of disadvantage that has become self-perpetuating. When we laugh at a racial joke or stereotype or fail to call out an inappropriate remark that reinforces damaging messages about ‘the other’ and fails to afford the full dignity due each person. When we see the vast inequities in educational and economic opportunities as only a problem *of* and *for* the affected populations, that have nothing to do with us. When we become defensive and dismiss important truths that make us uncomfortable, especially when those truths do not match the vision we have of ourselves as unbiased, as impartial, as completely fair.

Perhaps the most widespread shortcoming lies, for those of us who are white, in failing to recognize the degree to which the privilege of our light skin shapes the way we are perceived and the opportunities we are afforded. It wasn’t always that way for Jews, not by a long shot. For much of the Jewish people’s history in America, Jews were considered to be a distinct and inferior race. In 1937, Mordecai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, wrote, “The average Jew today is conscious of his Judaism as one is conscious of a diseased organ that gives notice of its existence by causing pain.” Given where Jews in this country are today, it’s hard to believe that we have recent experience in this country, well within the lifetimes of many in this room, with being a reviled minority against which there were official and explicit boundaries and prohibitions. Today, there are no formal barriers to Jewish participation in any aspect of American society, Jews hold leadership positions in virtually every field and

enjoy complete social equality – for goodness sake, *both* presidential candidates have daughters who married Jews and one of them even converted to Judaism! There is no question that in today's America, Jews – at least those of European descent – are unambiguously regarded as white, and that means that those of us who fall into that category benefit from white privilege – from the advantages, opportunities, and benefits that having white skin in this country automatically conveys.

White privilege means being taken seriously in settings from classrooms where I'm more likely to have my needs addressed and less likely to be disciplined or expelled; to banks where I'm more likely to get a loan or credit; to an HR department office where my application is more likely to be considered; to a department store where I don't automatically receive an extra layer of scrutiny as I shop and where other customers don't routinely assume I'm an employee rather than a patron; to the roads where I'm so much less likely to be pulled over as Philando Castile was *fifty-two times* in the past 14 years before being shot behind the wheel in July. (Think back: when was the last time you were pulled over by a police officer? When was the time before that?) It means I can generally assume that my rights will be upheld and that I can safely protest if they are not. It means being treated respectfully, but just thinking of that as being treated 'normally.'

White privilege means being given the benefit of the doubt, and second chances. It means I don't need to give my children 'the talk' about how to be careful and deferential with police officers or how not to run in the streets with their friends. White privilege means that, until recently, I didn't see and still have the choice of ignoring the systemic inequities and routine bias that African-Americans are subjected to daily – can choose to overlook them or fail to grapple with them because they aren't part of *my* experience. But it is a choice: even now, when horrifying cell phone images and stories are intruding, erupting into the consciousness of white Americans. Choice is a privilege white Americans have, to speak out or to remain silent. But as Jews there is only one choice, the imperative set before us in Deuteronomy: "See I set before you this day life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your children may live." (Deut. 30:19)

This is a day when we are enjoined to choose life: "*zochreinu l'chayyim*," "remember us for life, help us make choices that affirm life – our own lives and those of other people." This is a day when we acknowledge our individual and collective failures – both those of commission and those, like silence and ignorance, of omission. This is a day when we shed defensiveness and rationalization, which serve to shield us from both the conclusions we should draw about our attitudes and actions, and from the responsibilities those conclusions place on us to change. This is a day when we reflect on what we want our lives to look like, what we want to stand for, and how to align ourselves with our highest values. This is a day when we ask, "Who will live and who will die" – and need to acknowledge that death will come disproportionately to young, African-American men, who nationally are sentenced to death row and executed at three times the rate of white perpetrators and who are twenty-one times more likely to be victims of a reported police killing than young white men. This is a day when we commit to striving to make a change: in ourselves, and by extension in the fabric of our society. Making such a change is not easy: it involves a shift in habits, in attitudes, and a willingness to feel empathy, to allow ourselves to feel the disparities and to acknowledge our great privilege. But this is what this day calls us to, demands of us.

So where can we go from here, since impassioned language spoken in this room that remains in this room does not fulfill the obligations that this day and our Jewish ethical heritage place on us? The work that must be done is both internal and external, individual and collective. The internal work means those of us who are white – and it must be noted that the diversity of the American Jewish community and the number of Jews of color is on the rise – must carefully and honestly examine our own attitudes, assumptions, and biases. It means taking a test like the one through Project Implicit – which I'll post a link to on our website along with this sermon – and considering what the results reveal about the

unconscious attitudes we all hold in spite of the values we simultaneously profess and believe. It means having more honest and open conversations like we did last week at our Selichot program, where we hear about the realities facing people of color in this country and examine times where we have encountered or even been complicit in racist behavior and discriminatory standards. It means being more humble about own ability to assess or understand a reality that we do not ourselves experience, and to make room for perspectives and narratives that may not easily fit with our own.

It also means broadening the conversation out beyond ourselves, and to that end I have been in conversation with organizations we can constructively partner with around issues of racial justice, including our neighbors at Bethlehem Baptist Church and Temple Beth'El, the Jewish Community Relations Council, and the organization Showing Up for Racial Justice. In the weeks ahead, I will be sharing information about more opportunities for us to learn from and become involved with these partners in ways that enable us to live out our values and responsibilities, to serve as allies with organizations that are working to make positive and constructive change in our country. I will be posting information about ways that we can urge Congress to take action on sentencing reform, voting rights, and the death penalty – all areas where African-Americans and other people of color suffer from unequal standards. It means identifying aspects of this work we can do as individuals and as a community and considering ways to live out our core value of seeing all people as created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image, and equally worthy of respect and dignity.

A couple of weeks ago, I went to back-to-school-night for Tzvi, who just started tenth grade at Cheltenham. Cheltenham is a very solid, well-regarded, and diverse district and we saw the diversity reflected in the parents sitting in the auditorium for the opening portion of the evening. But as is so often the case at schools in our area, once the parents split up to follow their children's daily schedule and meet their individual teachers and Aimée and I visited the various honors and AP courses that Tzvi is taking, the parents in attendance were largely, if not exclusively, white. While no surprise given all the social and economic barriers that we know exist in our very own district, it was still a source of dismay and sadness for Aimée and me to see so graphically the ways in which a diverse district essentially becomes segregated in the classroom, with white students in the more advanced classes and African-Americans in the more standard ones. It's not, obviously, that black students are any less intelligent or less capable of advanced academic work. But it's distressingly easy to see how the choices teachers, administrators, parents, and students make respond to, reinforce, and reify racial assumptions and divisions. Around us, we were seeing – and were a part of – a system that, with no animus or evil intent, promotes white success and accepts black failure.

The failure is all of ours, the shortcomings are all of ours, the burden is all of ours – because this society is all of ours and its fate is all of ours. And our future depends on how we rise or fall collectively, working on behalf of and alongside those who do not share the advantages so many of us here today in this room enjoy. The Talmud says (B. Shabbat 127b): “Our rabbis taught: One who judges others favorably is himself judged favorably.” On this day when we sit before the Divine Judge hoping that our prayers and entreaties will be received favorably and that we will be judged with mercy, we must all consider how we can extend the same compassion and understanding we seek for ourselves and our children to others in our society. We must acknowledge the massive structural deficits faced by African-Americans in this country, the legacy of overt and explicit racist attitudes and policies that place blacks at a massive and systemic disadvantage. We must realize the way the legacy of those policies leaves a residue of injustice on our nation's soul. Those of us who are white must recognize the advantages and, yes, privilege we enjoy and be less certain that a person's outcomes, whether for good or bad, can be viewed as a product of their freely-made decisions. We must acknowledge the root causes of racial disparity and discrimination in our society, admit the pervasiveness of explicit and implicit bias, and not throw our hands up in despair, not let ourselves off the hook by telling ourselves that these problems

are so intractable that we have no meaningful role – and therefore no responsibility – in helping to put a stop to them. For this day calls us all to account, tears us down and raises us up, makes us confront not only what is but consider what might yet be, and demands that we harness our prayers, *teshuvah*, and commitment to work for a better future for us all.

May this day – its challenge and its potential – give us the strength and resolve we need to fulfill its promise.