

Temple Micah
Juneteenth Shabbat
Kelly Whitehead
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On Friday, January 15th, 1861, Rabbi Dr. Morris J Raphall approached the bima at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City and declared to his audience that the Hebrew Scripture sanctioned the institution of slavery.

“I am...justified, Rabbi Raphall said, “ when tracing slavery as far back as it can be traced, I arrive at the conclusion, that next to the domestic relations of husband and wife, parents and children, the oldest relation of society with which we are acquainted is that of master and slave. Rabbi Raphall pointed out that “*eved*,” the Hebrew word for slave, was first used in the bible by Noah after the flood narrative, “who curses the descendants of his son Ham, saying they will be עבד עבדים, the ‘meanest of slaves.’”

And so it happens: After the destruction, humankind begins again from the three sons of Noah and proliferates. Ham becomes the father of the African people, through his sons Cush, Mitzraim, Put, and Canaan, who later become enslaved by white Europeans. According to Raphall, black slavery, endorsed by Judaism, was integral to the structure of society.

“Noah,” Raphall argued,...”uttered a bitter curse against his descendants, and to this day it remains a fact... **the unfortunate negro is indeed the meanest of slaves.** Much has been said respecting the inferiority of his intellectual powers, and that no man of his race has ever inscribed his name on the Pantheon of human excellence, either mental or moral.”

On the eve of the Civil War, this rabbi shamelessly, and shamefully, declared the enslavement of America's black human beings to be God's will.

(long pause)

Raphall's sentiment was met by ferocious criticism by other Jewish religious leaders, who found this teaching to be immoral, blasphemous, and simply inaccurate.

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, father of the American Reform Movement, rejected Raphall's teaching, saying that "among all nonsense imposed on the Bible, the greatest is to suppose the Negroes are the descendants of Ham, and the curse of Noah is applicable to them."

Nevertheless, as the founder of the reform rabbinical seminary that trained future leaders, Hebrew Union College, failed to attack the institution of slavery itself. And this morning, the current leaders of the Hebrew Union College hosted a special dedication of a painting of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, which will now hang at the National Portrait Gallery downtown.

During his time, Wise preferred that Rabbis avoid making any strong political statements that did not directly involve Jews. Once the Civil War began, Wise declared that "silence must henceforth be our policy...on all the questions of the day."

With all this talk about silence, however, Wise remained hyper-critical of Abraham Lincoln and his supporters, referring to them as a band of Philistines worshipping their pagan god "Dagon,"

Noting that Abolitionism was a largely Christian-based movement, Wise criticized Abolitionists, calling them “the foul Fiend which stalks among us,’

“fanatics,”

“demagogues,”

And “demons of hatred and destruction,”

While Raphall offered an interpretation of our holy texts that endorsed America’s stark racial hierarchy, Wise refused to stand up against the unconscionable enslavement of black people.

Throughout history, we witness both enemies of justice and enablers of injustice. We can hold and feel shame over both kinds of leaders. We ought to hold shame over both kinds of leaders.

I know that it is unfair to judge the past by standards of the present.

I know the arc of justice is a journey, and

I know that we are further along than we were 150 years ago,

and yet we can and must still feel shame over our history as Reform Jews.

It is essential to look back at the mistakes our forebears made-- those of Noah and his interpreters-- and express our embarrassment at this history, to show that we know what is right and wrong. Feeling shame is core to who we are as a Jewish people.

The Talmud in Yevamot 79a teaches that there are three distinguishing marks of this “umah” – this Jewish people. We are merciful, we are performers of kindness, and we experience shame --

Shame is central to the end of the Noah story, that part of the story that Raphael used so despicably to justify slavery.

When the flood waters finally recede, and the earth is dry enough to cultivate, Noah clears the debris, plants a vineyard, harvests his new grapes, and presses them into wine. Noah pours himself a glass and drinks.

Noah drinks and drinks, hoping to oblivate the trauma; when he is good and drunk he strips naked in his tent, and passes out on the floor. Ham, the youngest of his sons, sees his father's nakedness and runs to tell his two older brothers. Immediately after, Shem and Japheth take a cloth, place it against both their backs, and, walking backward, cover their father's nakedness."

The next morning Noah wakes up, presumably hungover and irritated, and somehow finds out that his son Ham has seen him in a compromised state. Peevish, groggy, and petulant, he lets out a stream of vulgarities geared towards Ham's son: "Cursed be Canaan; The lowest of slaves Shall he be to his brothers," he shouts **יִהְיֶה לְאֶחָיו עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים אֲרִיר כְּנָעַן**.

Perhaps young Ham makes an error in running to tell his brothers about Noah's nakedness and in not averting his eyes from his father's shame. Be that as it may, Noah's reaction seems extreme and misdirected. Not only does he fail to own up to his own part in this story, he projects his embarrassment onto Ham's innocent descendants, to a devastating and lasting effect.

(long pause)

This story of the curse of Ham offers no direct evidence for Ham or Canaan's blackness.

Rabbinic Judaism helped stoke the idea of Ham's blackness, heaping upon it a host of racist associations.

In early Jewish literature, Ham is viewed as black because of the connection between the name Ham, the Hebrew word for hot, and חם, the Hebrew word for brown.

According to a 3rd century folktale, God prohibited Noah and all the creatures in the ark from engaging in sex during the flood, but Ham transgressed. His punishment was that he became black, a physical consequence for a sexual sin.

In a hyperbolic tale found in Genesis Rabbah, Ham doesn't just see his father's nakedness; he castrates him. Therefore, Noah said to Ham, "You have prevented me from doing something that is done in the dark, therefore your seed will be ugly and dark-skinned...Rabbi Hiya said: Ham came forth black-skinned."

From these shameful racist commentaries grows the myth of sinful blackness, of racial hierarchy, and deserving servitude.

(pause)

For centuries this story that we sing about with children and depict in art on the walls of classrooms and nurseries, served as the single greatest justification for race-based slavery. The Curse of Ham, through his son Canaan, took on normative force for Jews and gentiles alike.

As a descendant of former Hebrew slaves in Egypt but also more recent Afro-Caribbean slaves, I feel a deep sense of shame knowing that a story I love and consider sacred was used for so long to justify generations of indescribable pain and anguish.

Clearly the Rabbis of our past could not envision that blackness and Jewishness could be intimately intertwined, yet here I am.

(pause)

The myth of the biblical justification of black slavery led to the integration of racism into every structure of American society. Anti-black hatred seeped into the psyche of the American people and informed the opinions of every individual, Jews included, since the arrival of black people on these shores over 400 years ago.

Which brings me back to Isaac Mayer Wise.

Wise said that black people “represent[ed] all that is debased and inferior in the hopeless barbarity and heathenism of six thousand years.”

Wise said, “The Negro was never free; and his bondage in Africa was simply duplicated in a milder form when he was imported here.”

Wise said, “We are not prepared to maintain it is absolutely unjust to purchase **savages**, place them under the protection of law...man in a savage state is not free.”

According to Wise, whose portrait was celebrated this morning at the National Portrait Gallery at the bequest of my school- the very weekend of Juneteenth, I am a savage.

(pause)

Reading the racist words of the founder of my movement fills me with sadness, rage, and shame.

(pause)

My desire here, however, is not to wag fingers at people and the past with a sense of haughty superiority, but rather to use my shame as a prod to understand why there still seems to be such a tension between humanitarian ideals and their realization. The central narrative in Judaism is, after all, emancipation and exodus from slavery! We are asked, year after year after year, to imagine that we ourselves are slaves newly freed from Egypt. We as Jews are hosting Juneteenth celebrations across the country this weekend- many of our kids are off from school and camp and offices, including our own, are closed.

We need to be ashamed of Rabbis Raphall and Wise, beyond this weekend, for falling short on our core values. Without this capacity for shame, we cannot grow.

Just as Wise was a hero to the early Reformers, Noah was a hero for his time. Noah felt shame because his son viewed him in a compromised position. In that post-Diluvian world, Noah could have put that shame to use, serving as a role model for how to clean up a mess and right a wrong, setting a growth-oriented example for his sons, and by extension, to all of humanity. The biblical authors failed to seize the opportunity to show how someone might reflect upon and correct misbehavior.

Isaac Mayer Wise could have used his power within the Reform movement to set standards for justice and humanity. While he proudly countered Rabbi Raphall's shameful White Supremacist argument that black slavery was ordained by Scripture, his choice to remain silent and seemingly "impartial" was shameful. By choosing negative peace, Wise placed himself on the wrong side of history.

We would be foolish to shy away from this fact or fail to acknowledge the uncomfortable elements of our large movement's founding. Having the capacity for shame is a mark that we have a consciousness of right and wrong.

According to Bachya ibn Pekuda, were it not for shame, "men would not show hospitality to strangers..Many precepts of the Torah are fulfilled only out of shame."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel similarly taught that, “It would be a great calamity for humanity if the sense of embarrassment disappeared, if everybody was an all-rightnik, with an answer to every problem..”

Not only should we get comfortable with the uncomfortable by reckoning with our past; we should lean into the discomfort of the present in order to move forward.

It is important as informed Jews in our movement to view our history through an honest lens. Instead of stewing in the shame we uncover, we can use it as a launching pad towards justice, restitution, and now more than ever, reparations.

Isaac Mayer Wise failed to heed this teaching. As a result *he* was put to shame by other early Reform Rabbis, who dared to speak out against the horrifying institution of slavery.

Rabbi David Einhorn, the first Rabbi of the first Reform Congregation in America, Har Sinai in Baltimore, and one of the most prominent antebellum Jewish abolitionists, taught that all human beings come from “the same heavenly and earthly origin, [and] possess a like nobility of birth and a claim to equal rights, equal laws, and in an equal share of happiness.”

In articles and sermons, Rabbis like Einhorn and Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal of the midwest bravely modeled a new American Jewish approach to contemporary issues of social justice.

It is essential to teach the wrong parts of history alongside narratives of progress, mercy, and lovingkindess.

We do not cut out the parts of the Torah we do not agree with or find unseemly. After all, what is the Talmud if not pages of incorrect arguments nestled alongside favored opinions?

This Juneteenth, as we reflect on our history and the impacts of slavery, may we work to turn this misbegotten curse into a blessing:

וּנְאָמֵר, בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֱלֹהֵי שֵׁם, יַפֶּת, וְחָם

And we shall say: Blessed is the God of Shem, Ham and Yefet. May we be the Jewish people who accept the obligation of shame, and may we use it to inspire action, activism, and an impetus to be on the right side of history. May we strive to fix the mistakes of the past and avoid the dangers of staying silent. May we cultivate our own culture of mutual growth and may we be righteous not only for our generation, but for the world to come.