

Petrified Man

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By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

At the dawn of his writing career, Mark Twain wrote a short story entitled “Petrified Man.” He described the discovery of a mummy in the mountains south of Gravelly Ford. Upon examination, it was determined that the deceased came to his death from protracted exposure approximately a century earlier. Every limb and feature was perfectly preserved. The body was in a sitting position, its attitude was pensive. The way his hands rested upon his face, it appeared that he might be thumbing his nose at the world.

The people of the neighborhood volunteered to bury the man. But when they attempted to remove him, they discovered that the water which had dripped upon him for ages from the crag above had coursed down his back and deposited a limestone sediment under him which had glued him to the bedrock upon which he sat. The local judge refused to allow the citizens to blast the petrified man from his position so they could give him a proper burial. Such a course would be little less than sacrilege, the judge decreed. Twain concludes: Everybody goes to see the stone man — as many as 300 having visited the hardened creature during the past five or six weeks.

When Twain published this story, America was in the midst of the Civil War. Perhaps he was thinking of the Confederacy, hardened by its immoral certainty and thumbing its nose at the world.

The unvarnished truth about America is that we have yet to give the “Petrified Man” of the Civil War a proper burial. He remains cemented to the bedrock of our country. He is still thumbing his nose at America. Petrified Man still petrified of change. We have not fully atoned for our original sin: the horrendously evil idea that one group, or a particular race, is inherently inferior.

Dehumanization is the ultimate logic of racism. Jews know this. The moment they defined us as an inferior people — not even because of our ideas, but by our very being — they could do with us as they pleased. The road to Auschwitz was paved with the sediment of supremacy, centuries of scorn spread on the highways, byways and railways of Europe.

Racism subverts every principle of religious thought. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “To think of a man in terms of white, black or yellow is more than an error. It is a cancer of the soul.” From its first words, Judaism insisted that every human being, created in God’s image, has equal moral worth and equal moral standing.

Ha’lo av echad le’chulanu — “Have we not all one father?” Malachi insists.

Ha’lo el echad be’ra’anu — “Did not one God create us?”

Maduah nifgad ish be’achiv — “Why then do we betray one another?”

Ha’lo chi’vnei chushim atem, said Amos: “Black human beings, all human beings of every color, are equally precious to me.”

Shechora ani ve’nava — “I am black and beautiful,” wrote the poet of the Song of Songs.

The American tragedy is that white supremacy outlived both the victors and the vanquished of the Civil War. It outlasted post-war Reconstruction. In many ways, we are still fighting the Civil War. We are still trying to reconstruct America. We have made progress — even dramatic progress. We do not have

slavery. We no longer sic German shepherds on freedom riders or diners at lunch counters. But we still have racist dog-whistles that create havoc and let slip the dogs of culture wars. There is still systemic racism in America.

Racial reconstruction is our country's unfinished business.

Take, for example, the debate over Confederate statues. A statue is just marble or bronze and cement. In and of itself, it does not depress voting, create economic disparity, or cause unequal health outcomes. It does not jam its knee on the neck of a descendant of slaves, slowly snuffing out the flickering candle of life. But it is not enough to write laws abolishing slavery. Custom must also be transformed.

The custom of venerating leaders of the Confederacy is maddening. Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jefferson Davis, and their cohorts, were traitors. The Confederacy was secessionist, seditious and supremacist. There were not two morally acceptable views, with both sides containing some very fine people. There were taskmasters — and there were emancipators, perhaps personally flawed, but on the side of the angels. They honored God by redeeming the captive. As Frederick Douglass said about Ulysses S. Grant, a man he knew had many frailties: "In him the negro found a protector... a vanquished foe a brother — and an imperiled nation a savior."

I will never forget my feelings of revulsion in Kiev seeing a statue of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the Cossack leader who massacred tens of thousands of Ukrainian Jews, ripping babies from their mothers' wombs, burning three hundred Jewish villages to the ground. The destroyer of our people granted a place of honor in Kiev's central square. I remember thinking to myself that hatred of Jews will never disappear as long as custom elevates petrified savages to stone seats of reverence.

For these reasons, I state proudly and without reservation, that Black lives matter. It is important to say, because the truth of American history is that Black lives mattered less. When we wrote that Americans are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, we did not mean Black Americans. When we wrote: "We the people of the United States," we did not mean American slaves. They were not full people in our eyes. They were three-fifths people.

When we passed the post-war 13th Amendment, outlawing slavery, and the 14th Amendment conferring citizenship on former slaves, it still took a century to eliminate legal segregation. When we enshrined the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the right of former slaves to vote, it still took a hundred years to overcome intimidation, violence, lynching, Jim Crow, poll taxes and literacy tests, all designed to suppress African-American suffrage. Highly-paid political wizards still practice the dark art of voter suppression.

"The evil that men do lives after them," Shakespeare wrote.

The failure to reconstruct America in the 19th century, bequeathed unreconstructed racism, even to the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh generations. We can overcome. We have it in us. The history of America is the "story of liberty becoming ever-more conscious of itself." But we will never surmount the racial breach without a willingness to step into, and repair, the breach.

This is what most people mean when they say Black lives matter. This is what most protesters, most corporations, most public officials, most rabbis and ministers of all races mean. We mean that we are committed to a full racial reconstruction of America. We mean that we want to make America great for

all people. We mean that we want to push forward, not backwards. We mean that no person's elevation requires another's degradation.

When we say Black lives matter, we do not mean the condescending accusation that white lives, Native American lives, Jewish lives, Asian lives, do not matter, or matter less. We do not mean that we support the small minority of activists who perpetrate violence. We condemn them unequivocally. They distract from the righteous cause. Some are not even members of the local community. Their goal is either to sow division or simple looting.

The rule of law is freedom's central precondition. Freedom was enshrined, not at the far side of the Sea, but at Sinai, the mountain of the law. We cannot live in this city — nor can any American city, town or hamlet long endure when lawlessness, violence, destruction, and mayhem prevail. The rule of law is the thin veneer that protects us from chaos, anarchy and destruction. In 21st-century America, as in 20th-century America, any movement for social justice must be non-violent if it is to succeed.

We should all internalize this central principle of American democracy, because many millions more of us might soon have to go out onto the streets in peaceful, but insistent demand to uphold the results of the November elections.

When we say Black lives matter, we do not mean that we agree with the few who seek to demolish, who yearn to dismantle the economic and political infrastructure of America: who have lost faith in America's capacity to live up to its highest ideals. To the contrary, we mean that we are on the side of those who seek — and are prepared to work for — a more-perfect union. We mean that it is not been decreed in the heavens that America should forever be divided by race. "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves."

Those of us who are white do not really know what it is like to be Black in America. It is in the nature of human life: we internalize that which is internal to us.

Open your heart: So many Black Americans worry every time they leave their homes; when their teenage and 20-something children are out on the town, when they walk into bodegas or stores — when they jog in the neighborhood. Imagine if you lived that way. How free would you feel?

The beginning of morality is the ability to put yourself in another's shoes. That is what we mean when we say Black lives matter.

Listen to our fellow Americans and try to understand. Their experience with law enforcement is not our experience. Even something as innocent as bird watching in Central Park can be fraught with racial tension and potentially life-altering — if not life-threatening — consequences. It does not mean we should defund the police. *Shoftim ve'shotrim titen lecha* — you shall appoint judges and officers of justice, the Torah commands. There is no rule of law without law enforcement. But even the law enforcement community agrees that there is substantial reform that can, should, and must be implemented in police departments.

Open your eyes to the disproportionate deaths from COVID-19 in communities of color. Give heed to the poverty, under-employment and unemployment, unequal access to health care, housing, educational and economic opportunity.

The Black community cannot resolve these injustices by itself. Nor should it. These are not simply Black problems. They are American problems. “A prisoner cannot release himself from prison,” the Sages teach. Others must turn the key and unlock the door. Who knows this better than the Jews? We have been abandoned so many times along the way. So often, we yearned to be heard — to be helped, to be saved — for someone to unlock the doors of our prison.

Take sides. Judaism commands us to take sides. Stand on the right side of history. Stand on the side of freedom, fairness, and dignity. Stand on the side of liberty and justice for all.

Ve’he’avarta shofar tru’ah be’yom ha’kippurim, ukr’a’atem dror ba’aretz le’chol yoshveiha
Sound the shofar of freedom on the Day of Atonement. You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants.

Jews cannot be silent, nor can our synagogue. For two reasons:

First, because Judaism insists on liberty, dignity, generosity, charity, empathy for all of God’s creatures. *Chidlu ha’reah, limdu heitev, dirshu mishpat* — “Wash yourselves, make yourself clean. Put away your evil doings. Learn to do well. Seek justice. Relieve the oppressed. Plead for the disadvantaged.” (Isaiah 1)

Judaism is an activist, involved religion. Pursue justice. Relieve oppression. Plead for the poor. There is no such thing in Judaism as abstract theology disconnected from the real lives of real people. We do not speak exclusively of God in heaven. We bring heaven to earth through social repair.

Second, Jews also have an interest — a self-interest — in the wellbeing of others. Jewish history establishes conclusively that whenever and wherever insecurity is widespread; where there is economic distress, social unrest or political turmoil, Jews suffer disproportionately. We cannot be free unless everyone is free. We cannot be content while discontent pervades.

Thus, since politics is how free societies determine policies, we cannot avoid the political process. We would lose integrity. We would be unable to look ourselves in the eye. What kind of religion could maintain credibility lamenting the sufferings of the persecuted, but not caring about the policies that lead to suffering, or the measures that can alleviate suffering? What kind of religion offers beds to the homeless, but is unconcerned about the policies that cause or exacerbate homelessness?

The Jewish people has an historic alliance with the African-American community, born of our common experience of suffering, and empowered by our shared hopes of deliverance. When we say Black lives matter, we mean that we find in each other common cause, common decency and common humanity.

When we say Black lives matter, we mean that we have each other’s backs. We do not mean that we supported the noxious anti-Israel position of the Movement for Black Lives platform published four years ago, characterizing Israel as genocidal. That felt to us like a stab in the back. Nor do we think that most people, most African-Americans, most of the protestors on the streets — were even aware of that document, let alone supported its anti-Israel provisions. And in these very weeks, a summary of that document was redrafted excluding the repellent anti-Israel claims.

Dialogue works. Learning about each other works. Opening your heart works. Sharing your pain with good and fair-minded people works. The elimination of the anti-Israel statements was not coincidental. We are on the same side: the side of justice, righteousness, humanity.

Still, it is important to point out that we liberals are often not vocal enough about anti-Semitism and Israel bashing within the American Left. Our critics are right when they question our uncharacteristic reserve defending Jews from the excesses of the political Left – while we are so loud and indignant defending others from the excesses of the political Right.

In pursuance of the morally correct and politically important objective to join a broad alliance of social justice reformers, we cannot disregard vile, contemptible attitudes towards Jews – the very bigotry we decry when directed towards others. We cannot give the impression that liberal American Jews are willing to overlook, let alone, forego, our intense commitment to Israel and our unwavering loyalty to the Jewish people.

Liberal Jews can do both. Our choices are not binary. We can join the struggle for racial justice — we must join that struggle — while distancing from those who peddle hatred of Jews. As we have seen in these very weeks through the modification of the Movement for Black Lives platform, we will persuade most, and those who are unpersuaded, will eventually, be discredited. It is not we who will be cast outside the tent; it is they who will be marginalized.

To the best of my knowledge, we were the only synagogue in our area to announce publicly that we were discontinuing our participation in the Women’s March once its leaders began exploiting their platform to bash Israel and voice support for Louis Farrakhan. It was controversial at the time. But subsequent events vindicated us. The original Women’s March organization collapsed on its own. It could not sustain the internal contradiction of promoting social justice for all, while preaching and tolerating injustice against Jews.

Since we seem to be more timid in the face of Left-wing anti-Semitism, it is important for the Jewish world and our allies in the civil rights and social justice movements to understand, clearly, what liberal American Jews believe – and I think I speak for the majority of us: We do not stand with those who seek to cancel Israel, who skirt with hate. It is unbecoming, unproductive and unjust. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” You cannot stand for social justice and tolerate injustice in your own ranks.

During the summer, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar wrote a brutally honest op-ed about anti-Semitism within some quarters of the social justice movement. He lamented what he called the “shocking lack of indignation at anti-Semitic attitudes of some sports and entertainment celebrities.” He pointed to the creepy tweets, symbols and images implying that Jews are responsible for the oppression of Blacks; that Jews control the banks. He called out Black leaders who not only refuse to condemn, but actively support, Louis Farrakhan, who he termed a “notorious homophobe and anti-Semite.”

Abdul-Jabbar wrote: “It is impossible to take you seriously with regards to social justice or anything when you post anti-Semitic imagery. It is so disheartening,” he wrote, “to see people from groups that have been violently marginalized do the same thing to others without realizing that perpetuating this kind of bad logic is what perpetuates racism.”

This is what real courage looks like. This is what real leadership looks like: the ability to see moral principle clearly, and the willingness to contend with those in your own camp who distort the very principles that propel a righteous cause.

Judaism recognizes that it is a constant struggle to remain morally vital. We ossify over time. We become glued to our ways and petrified of change. Judaism teaches that the highest obstacle to justice is not in our stars but in ourselves. We refuse to accept personal responsibility for the wrongs of our world — *Al chet she'chatanu lefanecha bi'frikat ol* — for the sins we have committed against You by casting off responsibility.

We become arrogant. Our tendency is to treat the disadvantaged as if their natural vocation were poverty or misfortune. *Al chet she'chatanu lefanecha be'einayim ramot* — for the sins we have committed against You by haughtiness.

We become self-centered and self-absorbed — *Ve'al chet she'chatanu lefanecha be'tsarut ayin* — for the sins we have committed against You by selfishness.

We stand aside while our neighbor bleeds, tolerating or even contributing to oppression — *ve'al chet she'chatanu lefanecha be'hona'at re'ah* — for the sins we have committed against You by oppressing fellow human beings.

We develop moral heart disease - *Ve'al chet she'chatanu lefanecha be'timhon le'vav* - and for the sins we have committed against You by a confused heart. *Al chet she'chatanu lefanecha be'imutz ha'lev* - for the sins we committed against You by hardening our hearts.

But Judaism insists that we can overcome: *Ve'na'tati lahem lev echad, ve'ruach chadasha eten be'kirbechem. Ve'hissarti lev ha'even mi'bessaram, ve'natati lahem lev bassar*. The day will come that I will give them one heart. I will put a new spirit in you. I will remove your petrified heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Many of us are alive today because of the kindness and empathy of others, people who opened the door of our prison and offered us warm embrace. We may not even have been born, were it not for the sense of justice, the righteous indignation, of someone who did the right thing — often at great personal risk — for no reason other than it was right.

I learned this year that I would not be alive were it not for the generous heart and immense spirit of a woman I never knew. Several months before my mother died, she instructed my siblings, who were traveling to Israel to clean out my parents' Jerusalem apartment, not to forget to bring back a certain box. She described precisely where it was, and insisted several times: "Don't forget to bring back the box." She wanted that box in her possession when her time came.

After she died, we opened the box, as she knew we would. It overflowed with seven hundred yellow, yellowed pages of her memoirs. The hidden details of her past finally documented for her children to read. My mother never elaborated on her childhood because, as she wrote, she did not want to traumatize her children. Parts of her life were so painful that she felt that if we were to learn about these when we were young, it would damage us permanently.

When I learned of the contents of the box, memories from four decades ago flooded back to me. I would return from high school or army service, and she would be at the kitchen table writing on her yellow pad. I hadn't given it much thought then — and none at all for the 40 years since.

My mother described her Russian upbringing before, during and after World War II. She, her three siblings, and her parents, lived in an industrial city that few outside Russia ever heard of, in the Ural Mountains. Her family was so poor that the six of them lived in a one-room barrack on the outskirts of town. She described the poverty, the depravation, the numbing cold of Russian winters, the gnawing hunger that never dissipated. She described how, during the war, people died of starvation on city streets. She described the terror of the Stalin years, how paranoia and brutality crushed the lives of so many of her neighbors.

We never knew our grandfather. We finally learned the details in my mother's memoirs. Like so many millions of others, Stalin's henchmen grabbed him one day, and he disappeared. Decades later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the archives of that period were opened, and there in the sterile language of NKVD bureaucracy was the proof. He was executed not far from his home, three weeks after he was nabbed, leaving my grandmother alone to keep alive her four little children in a period of world war and mass starvation.

In reading my mother's memoirs, I learned of Olga Gardievskaya. Olga's husband was also murdered by Stalin. Olga, not Jewish, and not related in any way to my mother's family, took pity on my grandmother and her four children. She would bring them food from the cafeteria where she worked. Food was so scarce that sometimes she would steal. Like a Russian Jean Valjean, she broke the law to bring my mother and her siblings a loaf of bread. She would cash in her own food rations and give them to our family.

My mother writes: "In those days I was too young to think about it. I took it for granted. But today, I often think what a remarkable woman this was. She risked her wellbeing and her livelihood — she lost her job because of us when she was caught stealing — she risked her freedom, her life, to make sure we did not perish. Why?"

"Now," my mother writes, "as I think about these matters, it pains me greatly. I would like to cry out to tell Olga that we never forgot her. I am so sad that we never adequately showed what we felt for her. I hope that Olga is still alive. A woman like this deserves to live forever. If she is still alive, I know she too thinks of us often. Oh, that our thoughts could meet somewhere, and embrace. She and she alone, more than any other, at great and terrible risk, is the reason we are here to tell the tale. Several times when we were literally on the threshold of death, she single-handedly pulled us through."

My mother writes: "Every time I think of Olga tears come to my eyes. A human being so unique that I am frustrated at not being able to put it into words. I lament my limitations. I would like to write a poem, a masterpiece, to preserve her memory for all generations. To describe her, to honor her, to express the overwhelming feeling of gratitude that we feel for this human being."

"Olga!" my mother pens her name in exclamation. "If I could write, I would write an entire book about her. I would sing praises. I would compose symphonies. I would build statues. I would do all this and more if I only had the ability."

Instructing us from the world-to-come while we were still teenagers, my mother writes: "If any of you four kids one day should be blessed in any kind of creative art like music, composition, painting or writing, do your mother a favor. Give prominence to this most unusual woman. I will give you the alphabet. You put together what's in my heart. Not only because she saved us — that too. But because the world is not yet all that bad as long as there are people like Olga."

I am granting my mother her posthumous wish. But not only that, I am honoring a personal debt that cannot be repaid. Olga Gardievskaya! The savior of our family. I did not know Olga, nor had I even heard of her until this year. But she saved my mother, and thus, saved me. She saved all the future generations of our family. The world is not yet all that bad as long as there are people like Olga in it.

In this, our most sacred season, never forget the fundamental truth of Judaism. Humanity is our common lot. “We are all made of the same clay. We were born of the same void, inhabit the same flesh, and are dissolved into the same dust.” Do not harden. We are *lev echad* – one heart, one flesh.

We owe our lives to those who lived faithfully and now sleep in the dust. Many of them are unknown to us. They rest in unvisited tombs. But the growing good of the world depends on these people. Bit by bit, generation by generation, they blast the rock of injustice from the cold seat of Petrified Man, and lift the stones of indifference from our calcified hearts.

Tsu u're'u eizohi derech yishara she'yidbak ba ha'adam

Rabbi Yochanan asked: “What is the right path to which a person should cleave?” Rabbi Elazar responded, “*Lev tov*” — a good heart. A good heart presupposes and preconditions all other righteous qualities.

Judaism gives us the alphabet. It is for each of us to put together the words in our heart.