

Two Winding Paths to the Promised Land

After a recent visit with my mother, her parting words were a quote from Elie Wiesel: It is memory that will save humanity.

Mr. Wiesel's words – woven into his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize speech – are etched on the footstone at my mother's gravesite. She died four years ago, but our conversations continue. We spoke on a summer day shadowed by Black lives snuffed by whites. The Wiesel quote glowed with a quiet intensity as I recalled the words of Spike Lee. The acclaimed director of such films as *BlacKkKlansman* had weighed in after the killing of George Floyd ignited global protests over racial injustice.

“That flag, to me, the same way my Jewish brothers and sisters feel about the swastika, I feel about that flag.”

He was describing his reaction to the Confederate flag. I can only imagine what goes through Mr. Lee's mind in the face of a flag stitched to a hate-filled history. I know what goes through mine at the sight of a swastika: the memory of my mother's memories. She was a 16-year-old Polish Jew when Nazi bombs rained on Warsaw. The last line of her headstone reads: Holocaust Survivor and Educator.

I keep circling back to the footstone quote. How can memory save humanity? It's a tall order made monumental when the memory that must be kindled is a collective one. In Mr. Lee's thoughts on Confederate flags and swastikas I see a frayed thread connecting two peoples, and a pressing need by one to bridge the chasm between them.

As a white Jew, I cannot claim to know what it is like to walk in the shoes of a Black person who is pulled over, passed over, undervalued, devalued, worn down and worn out, cornered and killed because of racism. As a white Jew, I cannot deny these are the same shoes worn by all Jews of colour who endure indignities and inequities not only beyond our houses of worship but within them.

How to move forward? By looking back.

“Once we were slaves.” This bitter truth is proclaimed at Passover each spring. At our next family Seder, I will alter one word: “Once we were enslaved.” The choice of “enslaved” over “slave” by Nikole Hannah-Jones – creator of the 1619 Project – when she speaks of Black American history inspired me to do the same when sharing a scarring chapter in Jewish history. “Enslaved” widens the frame to include the hand gripping the whip, the calloused hand that left us dehumanized and stripped of our agency.

And one word will be added: “Once we were enslaved, too.” It's a gesture, a hand that reaches from the bondage of a distant Jewish past and rests on Black backs that hold the bequeathed memory of skin-splitting lashes.

Once we lived in ghettos, too. Slums, ghettos, inner cities. The graffitied synonyms for Black neighbourhoods have changed, but the fallout remains the same: cities cleaved by crushing disparities, people set apart from others. The word “ghetto” was first used in the early 1500s to describe the section in Venice where Jews lived restricted, segregated lives. This was centuries before we were corralled into ghettos like animals shoved into pens. For Jews across Europe, these thousand-plus ghettos – ringed with barbed wire, drained of hope – were a locus of death and desperation.

For the Jews who survived the Holocaust there was the salve of restitution. No ledger can faithfully record the unspeakable loss that lived in my mother’s eyes: a grandmother, aunts, uncles, first cousins, cherished friends. How do you begin to itemize a shattered world, a lifetime spent picking up the pieces?

In *The Case for Reparations*, his seminal 2014 essay for *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes: “Reparations could not make up for the murder perpetrated by the Nazis. But they did launch Germany’s reckoning with itself.”

When Jews hear the Black cry for reparations, we should hear an echo. Our respective histories are braided with broken lives. Our paths forward have long diverged.

On an April evening in 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. declared that he had seen the Promised Land.

“I may not get there with you,” he said in a speech the day before he was assassinated. “But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

It is a land that Jews haven’t yet reached, despite a head start that leaves Blacks well behind us. To be white and Jewish is to know privilege and persecution. A passport to the Promised Land is written on our skin, but white skin didn’t save us from the gas chambers. White skin has never shielded us from the scourge of anti-Semitism. We aren’t white enough for the white supremacists who fuelled conspiracy theories as they marched through the streets of Charlottesville, Va., torches aloft, warning that “Jews will not replace us!”

I see the hydra of hostility toward Jews for what it is: a spectrum of faces, from the benign to the venomous, masking the same contempt. But I cannot remain blind to the benefits that have been baked into a system by whites for whites. It will take all our will to build the scaffold that scales the heights of privilege and power and begin to dismantle the walls that separate the haves from the have-nots.

My father was a learned man who never finished high school, the son of Russian immigrants who fled the fatal fury of pogroms. Carved into his footstone is a quote from the revered sage and scholar Rabbi Hillel.

If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?

And if I am only for myself, then what am I?

If not now, when?

There was a time when I saw in the last question a flickering candle. Today it flares with a scorching urgency. As I stand in the cemetery where my parents and grandparents lie buried, swathed in five thousand years of history, I hear a plea to plumb our collective memory. We have known centuries of devastating and deadly wrongs. We still know, first-hand, the slings and arrows harnessed by hatred.

We have also known advantages that are easy to overlook but impossible to ignore, a stark truth in black and white. I carry a licence to transgress that is in my hands to revoke. Time to lean in and see whether I recognize the reflection in eyes that burn with righteous indignation. Now is the time to listen to my Black sisters and brothers, to heed the need for justice long overdue. Change is afoot. The narrow road to the Promised Land is wide enough to be shared.

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