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LINKING SYSTEMIC RACISM AND POVERTY: VOTING RIGHTS, ENDING MASS INCARCERATION, AND JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANTS

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These texts all try, in one form or another, to get at our underlying humanity and equality before the law. At the same time, when we pursue that line of thinking, we sometimes run into a tendency towards "color-blindness," where we assume that race shouldn't or doesn't matter. This can be done with good intentions or malicious ones; either way, it leads us to ignore the ways in which white supremacy is woven into the fabric of American society. Throughout this text study, try to keep in mind where in your life you are and are not cognizant of race, and what that might say about the privilege you carry.

I. FROM POVERTY TO DISCRIMINATION

A. Leviticus 19:15

You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly.

לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּ עָוֶל בַּמִּשְׁפָּט לֹא־תִשָּׂא פְנֵי־דָל וְלֹא תֶהְדַּר פְּנֵי גָדוֹל בְּצֶדֶק תִּשְׁפֹּט עֲמִיתֶךָ׃

To whom do you think this mitzvah/commandment is directed?
How does this verse reflect both society as it exists and society as we hope it can be?

B. *Torah Temimah* on Lev. 19:15

"Do not show deference to the rich." You should not say, 'He is wealthy, the son of mighty/noble people; how could I [possibly] embarrass him?' Therefore it is said: "Do not show deference to the rich."

ולא תהדר פני גדול. שלא תאמר עשיר הוא זה, בן גדולים הוא, ואיך אביישנו, לכך נאמר ולא תהדר פני גדול.

How does this commentary unpack what comes along with wealth or poverty?
What else might the Torah have meant by this commandment that this commentary is missing?

C. *Shemot Rabbah* 30:24

When a judge issues a true verdict in keeping with the facts, the Holy One as it were leaves the heaven of heavens and causes the divine presence to be at the judge's side, as it says, "When the ETERNAL raised up judges for them, the ETERNAL was with the judges" (Judges 2:18). But when God sees that a judge shows partiality (to one litigant), God removes the divine presence and returns to heaven.

בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהַדַּיָּן יוֹשֵׁב וְדָן בֶּאֱמֶת כִּבְיָכוֹל מַנִּיחַ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא שְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וּמַשְׁרֶה שְׁכִינָתוֹ בְּצִדּוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שופטים ב, יח)׃ וְכִי הֵקִים ה׳ לָהֶם שֹׁפְטִים וְהָיָה ה׳ עִם הַשֹּׁפֵט, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁרוֹאֶה אוֹתוֹ שֶׁהוּא נוֹשֵׂא פָנִים, כִּבְיָכוֹל מְסַלֵּק שְׁכִינָתוֹ וְעוֹלֶה לַשָּׁמַיִם.

In this text, what are the multiple consequences of a judge being partial or impartial?

How might you read this text differently if you imagined this judge presiding over a criminal case, a civil case, an immigration hearing, or in another context?

II. VIEWING RACE THROUGH A TORAH LENS

A. *Sanhedrin* 38a

The Sages taught: Adam was created alone, and for what [reason]?... due to the righteous and due to the wicked. So that the righteous will not say: We are the children of a righteous one [i.e., and righteousness is natural for us, so there is no need for us to exert ourselves to be righteous], and so that the wicked will not say: We are the children of a wicked one [and cannot change our ways].

Alternatively, [he was created alone] due to the families, so that the families will not quarrel with each other. And if now that [Adam] was created alone, they quarrel, if they were created two [people initially], all the more so.

תנו רבנן אדם יחידי
נברא... מפני הצדיקים
ומפני הרשעים שלא יהו
הצדיקים אומרים אנו בני
צדיק ורשעים אומרים אנו
בני רשע

דבר אחר מפני המשפחות
שלא יהו משפחות מתגרות
זו בזו ומה עכשיו שנברא
יחיד מתגרות נבראו שנים
על אחת כמה וכמה

This is an excerpt from a longer famous passage which extolls many reasons why Adam as created singularly.

What does this text say to you about race and racism? About our ability or inability to transcend the circumstances of our birth?

B. *Yalkut Shimoni* on the Torah 13:2

God gathered the dust [of the first human] from the four corners of the world—red, black, white and green. Red is the blood, black is the innards, and green for the body. Why from the four corners of the earth? So that if one comes from the east to the west and arrives at the end of his life as he nears departing from the world, it will not be said to him, "This land is not the dust of your body, it's of mine. Go back to where you were created." Rather, every place that a person walks, from there she was created and from there she will return.

התחיל לקבץ עפרו מד׳ פנות
העולם אדום שחור לבן ירקרק.
אדום זה הדם שחור אלו הקרבים
ירקרק זה הגוף. ולמה מד׳ פנות
העולם שאם יבא מן המזרח
למערב ויגיע קצן להפטר מן
העולם שלא תאמר הארץ אין עפר
גופך משלי חזור למקום שנבראת
אלא כל מקום שאדם הולך משם
הוא גופו ולשם הוא חוזר ׃

The *Yalkut* is a compilation of earlier midrashic sources by a German rabbi and is known to have been complete by 1310. Note that this predates modern conceptions of "whiteness," so don't read too much about race into the glossing over of white dust.

What does this text say to you about race and migration? How is its message similar to or different from the previous text?

C. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 19-20.

It is time we exorcised Plato's ghost, clearly and unequivocally. Universalism must be balanced by a new respect for the local, the particular, the unique. There are indeed moral universals—the Hebrew Bible calls them "the covenant with Noah" and they form the basis of modern codes of human rights. But they exist to create space for cultural and religious difference…The proposition at the heart of monotheism is not what it has traditionally been taken to be: one God, therefore one faith, one truth, one way. To the contrary, it is that *unity creates diversity*. The glory of the created world is its astonishing multiplicity: the thousands of different

languages spoken by mankind, the hundreds of faiths, the proliferation of cultures, the sheer variety of the imaginative expressions of the human spirit, in most of which, if we listen carefully, we will hear the voice of God telling us something we need to know. That is what I mean by *the dignity of difference*.

Rabbi Sacks is writing primarily about religion, but his argument may be extended to race by analogy. Does that work for you? Is anything lost when we move from religion to race?

D. Dr. Koach Baruch Frazier, in *NiSh'ma: L'Dor V'Dor*, May 2018.

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…Knowing one's ancestry is powerful and provides the opportunity to explore one's heritage and the legacies of previous generations.

To be sure, though, using a classification such as the historic "one-drop rule," which aimed to define racial purity, white supremacy culture has used ancestry to perpetuate systems of discrimination and oppression. This rule asserted, if you have at least one ancestor from Africa, you are considered black, no matter your skin tone or heritage.

Fortunately, our sages left us with a blueprint that leads us toward a more inclusive understanding of our ancestry. We are indeed descendants of one common ancestor...And yet, in order for this equality to exist, we have to find ways to affirm this common humanity in each other. We must resist the legacy of white supremacy: a culture of hatred, isolation, and utter disregard for one another. We can resist by reminding ourselves of our shared ancestry, a fact that scientists confirm through our mitochondrial (maternal) DNA, offering a legacy of liberation rooted in real and meaningful connection, compassion, and dignity…

Dr. Frazier self-describes as Black/Queer/Trans/Jew - a healer and musician. He is an anti-racism educator and audiologist and will begin rabbinical school in the fall of 2018.

How does Dr. Frazier build on the texts above? How does he challenge them?

III. SYSTEMIC RACISM

A. Rabbi Yaakov Culi, *Me'am Loez* on Ex. 1:22, 18th c. Turkey/Spain (Translated from the original Ladino by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan)

"Throw into the river." Pharaoh's decrees became harsher and harsher. Soon he decided that throwing the infants into the Nile was not sufficient... If a man did not make his quota of bricks on a given day, he was given a ghastly choice: Either he or his child would have to be placed in the structure to make up for the missing bricks...

Many Israelites were mortared into the walls of the structures while still alive. They screamed and begged for mercy, but no one would take pity on them. Many infants were also thrown into the fire.

Throughout all this, the Israelites did not know that this was a plan devised against them by Pharaoh. They were led to believe that such ghastly acts were being done by individual Egyptians on their own initiative. Many Israelites even complained to the authorities and were told that if proper witnesses would be brought, the perpetrators would be punished. Eventually, of course, the Israelites discovered the truth.

What does this text say to you about the nature of racism?

How do you read the literary allusion to being placed "within the structure"?

B. Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Diary*, June 1915

We are not born free and equal, but we are born to become free and equal. It is the goal of all social endeavor to bring about equality in the inequality into which people are born. It is the goal of spiritual endeavor to make humanity free.