**Central Reform Temple, Yom Kippur 2023**

You will recall that Abraham’s father Terach took the family from Ur deep in Modern day Iraq upto Haran now situated in Turkey. They brought everything with them; family, livestock and servants. Then Abraham is famously told to pick up and leave again to go to the land of Israel. The Genesis text tells us he brings with him everything he acquired in Haran along with all his family and livestock and servants from Ur. It was becoming quite a tribe made of peoples from across this vast region. People of different cultures and races.

Ten Generations later, you will recall that Moses in leaving Egypt took with him all the people of Israel, their livestock and the text tells us, a mixed multitude of peoples who allied themselves with the children of Israel. In Hebrew Erev Rav means mixed multitude. In the book of Exodus, it tells us that Moses had to flee from Egypt to go to Midian in present day Arabia. There he married Zipporah, the daughter of the priest Jethro. Later in the book of Numbers, we are told she is actually described as coming from Kush which would associate her with Nubia in Sudan or Ethiopia, south of Egypt and actually this makes more sense of the story since Nubia was a place of natural escape for fugitives. Kush is the Hebrew word to describe a place of dark-skinned peoples. It would suggest that the *Erev Rav* that Moses brought out of Egypt – the mixed multitude, included descendents of the tribes of Israel from Canaan, originally from the Persian Gulf, African peoples from his wife’s family and native Egyptians seeking their freedom from Pharoah. It was a multitude of peoples from different backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities. *Erev Rav* – a great mixing or crossing over of peoples. Exodus 12 tells us they went up – *alah* – together to reach the Promised land. And the God who does all this for them is called *Adonai Tzevaot* – which we metaphorically translate as God of Hosts but literally means God of all colours.

They were all people of colour who formed the foundation of the Jewish people. That is why we can’t define Jews as a race for we have from our very beginning been a mixture of races, cultures and ethnicities. Today, particularly in Western countries, we have come to think of Jews as white and in many ways this has eased our assimilation and integration as we moved across Europe to North and South America, South Africa and Australia. However Jews of India, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia of course retained their own ethnicity and remain Jews of colour, black, brown and white. We are still an *Erev Rav*.

Passing for white in the West has given us certain advantages. Despite obstacles and objections to our integration, we have pretty much assimilated ourselves into our societies certainly as well as, if not better than, other immigrants who do not pass as white. Yes, our great grandparents and grandparents suffered discrimination and prejudice and endured antisemitism and yes they worked hard for their rights and achievements often at the risk of losing their Jewish identity or that of their children. They had a strong work ethic and a robust quest to be part of general society. As an older immigrant said to me this week; They knew they had to be better than those around them. But it is true to say that our advantages have been significantly aided because of our white privilege in our society.

After the killing of George Floyd and Breona Tayler and the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement with continued and pervasive institutional racism and violence against people of colour, there has been a certain sense of incredulity that such racism could still exist in our modern societies. After all didn’t we watch Martin Luther King proclaim his dream of peoples of all colours living together and presume that it had all come true. Degoratory words used when I was a child have dropped from polite society, children’s rhymes and public discourse. Surely we now have our own ‘*Erev Rav’* in our multicultural societies where black and brown, Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander and African and Caribbean, White and Jewish enjoy each other’s food and culture and music together in our cities with their diverse restaurants and festivals, national dress and cultures.

But we were wrong. Black Asian Minority Ethnic peoples still face discrimination and prejudice in housing, jobs, education, healthcare and violence perpetrated against them. And it is because of their colour; Colour of their skin which defines them in the eyes of our society. I have a Jewish student of colour who told me moving across the country to come study as a rabbinic student in Boston was a nightmare. Frequently she was misidentified as a person of suspicion on public transport, finding housing where our students typically live became unusually difficult, entering a synagogue or Jewish school elicited anxious glances and comments.

I grew up in Birmingham, England: a very multi-cultural and multi-faith city. It happens to have good integration of housing and schools with people of all colours working side by side. But this didn’t happen by accident. When I was growing up, race relations was a significant issue that demanded attention from all and the Jewish community was no exception. My synagogue held annual festivals of multicultural learning and understanding and invited peoples of all cultures and religions to participate together so that eventually all Houses of Worship in the City were hosting each other for all kinds of events during an assigned week each year. I remember as a kid visiting Mosques and Qudwaras, Buddhist Shrines and Sikh Temples and then hosting at the synagogue and explaining the symbols and rituals of our faith. We made friends with Pakistani, West Indian, Jamaican, Kenyan kids living in our city whom we wouldn’t ordinarily meet. We felt that dialogue and connection was the key to inter racial and interfaith harmony and understanding. Learning about and learning from each other. But we still had our unacknowledged whiteness to our advantage.

That is why I was so excited to be part of the Embrace Installation that we promoted last January. We brought over 150 members of the Jewish community together to celebrate the life and work of Rev Dr and Mrs King and process with the Torah scroll to the installation ceremony on the Common. It was slightly disappointing that we could not meet with those participating in the installation inside the security cordon but we were delighted that the Rev Pat Walker graced us with her presence that Friday night for services and affirmed the importance of our participation.

It is time for us to recognize that notwithstanding our desire to see a society of equality and non discrimination and even acknowledging that we are an Erev Rav at heart, we are a part of the problem as well. When I say that to Jews, they are quick to point out that we are discriminated against as Jews, that we have suffered uniquely in the Holocaust and that we had to demonstrate our loyalties with sacrifices and that is true. But it doesn’t take away from the fact that we don’t perceive the ways in which a person of colour experiences the world around him or her. Whether it is a young black boy playing in a predominately white playground or a young black woman walking home at night or a family of colour participating in a local neighbourhood activity or indeed coming to synagogue. It is not a zero sum game. We do not negate the discrimination against us when we highlight the discrimination against others. In fact, they give strength one to the other. I gave a sermon this year about the rising level of Antisemitism and Jew hatred around us. I received some feedback from someone who was upset that I would focus on this, noting that Jews rather need to acknowledge the race hatred that is ingrained in our City. In good Jewish fashion, I responded, You are right and I am right too. Both forms of hatred are unacceptable and need to be resisted.

Indeed, because we acknowledge that we are an *erev rav*, because we have suffered as a minority, because Abraham and Moses taught us to know the heart of a stranger, we should be more than ready to understand our white privilege and work hard at making our synagogues and Jewish communities havens of support, protection and understanding for peoples of all races and colours.

We must ensure that all minorities understand and learn from each other and help and support each other in their work to become part of the multi coloured fabric of our society and to change that society for equal access and equality.

A group of our members has been meeting over the last three years to learn about this enduring scar in our society. They have diligently read the literature and studied the underlying issues of prejudice and intolerance in our society. They want to do more and they want to join with others in moving forward to effect tikkun – repair to the problems faced by people of colour. I invite all who are interested to join them and build a coalition that will make a difference to inter-racial issues here in Back Bay.

But for all of us, I would encourage us this year to think carefully about the ways in which we may perpetuate oppression or prejudice, deny access to equality by virtue of our whiteness and do all that we can to ensure that all peoples can find an equal place in our society where institutions will treat them fairly and their experiences are validated and understood. As I said on Rosh Hashanah belonging is not just a place where you can fit in, it is a place where you can become your true self and fulfill your longing to see the whole as part of your portion. Remember; Be- Long.

God, who is *Adonai Tzevaot*, is made up of all the colors in every combination and configuration. It gives new meaning to an image of God.  And we are created *b’zelem Elohim*, in the image of God. We reflect this best when we are all together as one, fighting our implicit biases, when we are allies with people of color and when we come back to being an *erev rav* – acknowledging the greatness of the multi-racial world that God created for us to enjoy and appreciate with dignity and justice.