

What do we Preserve? What do we Reject? What do we Reinterpret?
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What do we preserve? What do we reject? What do we reinterpret? The movement to take down Confederate monuments during recent racial protests across the country raises a broader issue: how do we understand our history, as Americans and Jews?

A central feature at the entrance of many medieval European cathedrals is the presence of two female statues. One depicts *Ecclesia*, the Church, standing proud and grand, scepter in hand and crown on her head, often holding a globe of the earth to symbolize victory and conquest. Opposite it is *Sinagoga*, destitute, gaze downward, holding a broken spear, tablets falling off her hands, and blindfolded, she represents the vanquished, spiritually blind Jews. The religious art of Western and Eastern Europe is pocked-marked with such expressions of anti-Judaism.

Though the Catholic Church and mainline Protestant denominations have repented and repudiated antisemitic theology, we still hear echoes of the hateful past from right-wing white supremacists, and from the likes of Louis Farrakhan and his followers on the left, in the sports and celebrity arenas.

Anti-Jewish iconography exists also in the secular public square. A majestic site in Kiev is a monument to Bogdan Chemylnitzky, whom Ukrainians revere as their hero of independence. This is the Chemylnitzki who in the 17th century carried out the bloodiest pogroms against the Jews, thousands killed and 300 communities destroyed. Nathan Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident and modern Israeli politician, reminds us that while the Ukrainians are increasingly open to engaging Jews and addressing their country's history of antisemitism, the thought of taking down Chemylmitsky is inconceivable.

What would Spanish history be without Ferdinand and Isabella, who through the Inquisition persecuted, tortured, killed and expelled tens of thousands of Jews; or Catholic history without the Crusades? What about Louis IX, the enlightened French monarch but notorious antisemite, after whom the capital of Missouri is named? What would Protestantism look like without Martin Luther, the leading European religious reformer, and Jew hater?

And let us not forget Voltaire, the leader of the Enlightenment, and his unabashed anti-Judaism; or Doestoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Karl Marx, a rabbi's grandson who had no fondness for his people.

And what about the stain of pervasive antisemitism in English literature, from Chaucer to Shakespeare, to Shaw, T.S. Elliot and Aldous Huxley? Do we ban those books? Do we cancel that literature?

The great actors and shapers of history are seldom saints. Moses could not enter the promised land because of his shortcomings; but he paved the way. King David, from whom tradition tells us the Messiah will come, was a great psalmist, but not a very nice person. The biblical account of the flood says: "Noah was a righteous man in his generation." A commentary notes that "In HIS generation" points to the relative goodness of his character in a depraved generation. And yet, he becomes the ancestor of a new humanity. Ecclesiastes reminds us: "Surely, there is no one on earth who is (fully) righteous, who does (only) good and never sins."

So what do we do with Columbus, Washington, Jefferson, Wilson, Roosevelt? What about Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who fought for women's suffrage but harbored antisemitic sentiments and resisted granting the same right to black males? Shall they stand for their achievements and virtues; or fall for their failures and flaws?

Iconoclasm, the tearing down of idols or venerated images, is a practice of ancient vintage. In antiquity, the Egyptians destroyed images of Pharaohs with whose religious and political innovations successive dynasties disagreed. On July 9th, 1776, American patriots tore down the statues of King George III in New York. The toppling of statues, the erasure of personalities, the reshaping of reputations, and the rewriting of history was at the core of early Soviet totalitarianism. The Taliban blew up enormous 6th century statues of Buddha's in Afghanistan because they were deemed offensive idols.

As Americans, we proudly remember President Reagan's stern admonition to the Soviet regime: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" And the wall came tumbling down. And we cheered! And so did Lenin's statue in Red Square. And we cheered! Later, we saw Saddam Hussein's statue fall. And we cheered!

History is not necessarily the record of what actually happened, but of how it is told. Every historical narrative contains what my professor and mentor, Rabbi Robert Gordis, called a "nucleus of truth and a protoplasm of imagination." That element of imagination, of cultural mythology, represents what the people or the leaders want to convey at any given time. Asked what he thought of Western Civilization, Mahatma Gandhi famously replied: "I think that would be a good idea!"

The narrative of the discovery and the conquest of America and of the founding of the United States differs depending on who tells it: the indigenous peoples or the Europeans; the Native Americans or the Westward expansionists; the Spanish, the French, or the British. We all tell history in a way that seeks to justify our story. What for Israelis and Jews is Yom Ha'atzmaut, proud Israel Independence Day, is for Palestinians the Nakbah, the catastrophe or disaster.

Can diverse histories be reconciled; can conflicting narratives coexist?

So, what about those Confederate statues?

During a recent Conversation on Race in America (hosted by the Washington Post), Mitch Landrieu, former Mayor of New Orleans, and Wynton Marsalis, world renowned trumpet player, discussed the Confederate statues. They reminded us that the Confederate statues are monuments to a "lost cause." They were put up intentionally, after the Civil War ended, to reverence and honor individuals who had "tried to destroy the United States of America for the cause of preserving slavery." Their presence in the public square preserves an institutional bias and unconstitutional principle. Black people who walk by those statues are reminded of racism and degradation. Much more than mere stone and metal, "They represent an idea...that white people are superior to black people..."

Modern Germany erected no monuments to the Nazis. Through a sensitive and studious process of reckoning and repentance, they chose to honor the victims, not the perpetrators.

Mr. Landrieu reminded us that it is "important for the country to make itself go through - not over, not under, not around, but through the issue of race, which means that we have to talk to each other about it."

As a part of this process, some things have to go. We are not talking about icons in medieval European cathedrals. We are talking about America today, about recent memory. Confederate monuments that reinforce division and racism should not stand, just as the Wall that stifled freedom in the heart of Europe had to come down.

Even as they come down, we need to build up. We need a national commission of artistic and racial reconciliation that addresses these issues thoughtfully. Some of the statues should be kept in museums and educational settings so that people do not forget the evil that we once thought acceptable, even honorable. We should then erect monuments that speak to American democratic values, monuments around which people can gather as equals to celebrate our common heritage and our diversity.

We need to remember and forget; to own and to reject; to preserve, to understand and to reinterpret. We need to reconsider our cultural mythology, that protoplasm of imagination. We are now a very different country than we were at our founding. There are many actors whose ancestors were present and suppressed, and there are others whose ancestors were not present at all, but are part of who we are today, and who we shall become tomorrow. Our national story must reflect our growing diversity.

We need to acknowledge the hatred in our past and how it informs our present, and do collectively what this season demands of us: *Heshbon Hanefesh*, examination of the soul and *Teshuvah*, repentance, change, renewal.

Several congregants have asked me lately: "Rabbi, what do you think of Black Lives Matter?" I said: "They do". In 2016, an organization by that name contained in its platform statements antagonistic to Israel that bordered on antisemitism. The organization helped to coordinate the Woman's March that, because of its leader's refusal to distance themselves from Louis Farrakhan's antisemitic vitriol, was denounced by many Jewish groups and community leaders, including Sandy and me. We need to continue to be vigilant and responsive to expressions of antisemitism from the left and the right.

Today's Black Lives Matter movement does not espouse an anti-Jewish platform. It has emerged as one of the voices of a new civil rights movement, and has been publicly endorsed by mainstream Jewish organizations across the country.

Of course, within every group there will be extremists prone to violence. They are the loudest and most destructive voices. We should not defer to them the control of the agenda; the usurping of the center. Even as we would not wish to be understood in terms of our most extreme voices, let us be careful not to understand others by theirs.

Acts of violence during otherwise peaceful demonstrations are deplorable, but should not distract us from the core issues at hand. Violence is not a solution. Unhelpful, also, are the voices that decline to endorse the very concept of a "peaceful transfer of power" after the elections.

Sadly, for most of American history, Black lives, the lives of Native Americans and of other minorities have not always mattered that much. Albert Einstein called racism – America's "worst evil". Speaking to students at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania (the oldest Black college in the Western world), he said that racial segregation was "not a disease of colored people, but a disease of white people," and he added, "I will not remain silent about it." Neither should we.

We, who have suffered antisemitism for millennia and deeply believe in the value of every life, must affirm that Black Lives Matter. This is not a political slogan; it is a moral principle.

America has come a long way. When Dr. Martin Luther King proclaimed that he had a dream, he spoke of it as “deeply rooted in the American dream.” It was a vision of hope and a promise.

Martin Luther King Jr., George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson – just like Moses, King David, David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir – were not perfect individuals, nor did they imagine that they were building upon a perfected tradition.

Judaism is not completed. Israel’s story is a work in progress. Our humanity is a constant striving. American Democracy is an ongoing experiment.

Yom Kippur reminds us precisely of that: of our limits and our fallibility, but also of our potential and promise. The ancient rabbis tell us that we are born grasping onto two messages in our hands: One says: “You are but dust and ashes,” imperfect, perishable. The other says that “for your sake was the world created.” Despite our finitude, we are partners of the Infinite in completing the works of creation, the tasks of redemption.

So, at this pandemic time, let us not only labor to find the physical cure to the virus, but also to find ways to heal as a society, as a nation, as we move to a new normal, preserving the best of our past, rejecting its distortions, and reinterpreting it for ours and future generations. We may not complete the work; but, we dare not desist from trying.

Being an American has never been about preserving the “status quo ante”, things as they are. It is about possibilities, things as they can and should be. Carl Schulz (1829-1906), Union Army General during the Civil War, affirmed: “My country, right or wrong; if right to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.” The patriotic anthem, “America the Beautiful”, is a prayer: America, America! /God mend thine every flaw, / confirm thy soul in self-control, / Thy liberty in law!

Just like a human being must confront, own and overcome weakness and failure in order to grow, so must our traditions and our democratic heritage be renewed. On Yom Kippur, we do this as Jews. On Election Day, we do this as American citizens. We do our *Heshbon Hanefesh*, our soul-searching, to keep our democracy free and just, a striving for harmony at home and for peace abroad.

During our Neila service at the end of Yom Kippur, we will pass through the last Gates of the Old Year. Even as new Gates will open in the year ahead, some Gates we must close behind us. We must close the Gates of Callousness and Indifference, of Racism and Prejudice, of Injustice and Hate. And as we close those Gates, let us open Gates of Equality and Justice, of Promise and Opportunity, of Love and Joy.

Let us, who have known the pain of prejudice and exclusion, remember that neither Heaven nor America are Gated Communities. The Gates are Open for all who wish to enter. Let us enter the Gates to a New Year of renewal, of hope and of peace.