

The Curse of Ham or the Curse of Japhet

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Growing up in Houston, dinner at the tables of my two grandmothers could not have been more different from one another. At my paternal grandparents' home, my grandmother did the cooking, and the struggle would be to entice her to sit down at the table rather than continuing to bustle about the kitchen. At my maternal grandparents' home, by contrast, dinner was prepared by a woman employed in the kitchen and served by another employee, a man described as the butler.

My maternal grandmother had a turtle-shaped dinner bell. Pushing down on the turtle's head or tweaking its tail would summon the butler to clear the plates, bring the next course, or refill water glasses. Ringing the bell, magically causing the man to appear, was great fun for a kid.

Rabbi Brian Stoller is ten years younger than I, and we did not know one another until we were both rabbis, though we both grew up in Houston. Our families were leaders on opposite divides of a congregational split in the 1940s, so my grandparents and his great-grandparents certainly knew each other.

When you read the beginning of Rabbi Stoller's contribution about this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Noach*, the story of the Flood, in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, you will think that I plagiarized it for the beginning of this sermon. Rabbi Stoller describes that exact same dinner bell and the fun of summoning the butler—in the case of his family, a man named Walterⁱ.

Rabbi Stoller's mother, though, would never let him ring the bell. He writes, "she said it was disrespectful to Walter. I used to wonder why; after all, my great-grandmother was a respectful person, a pillar of our community. I never stopped to think about how the bell must have made Walter feel. Maybe angry, probably humiliated. In retrospect, the most embarrassing thing is that, with the exception of my mother, my family and I were never embarrassed by it. We loved Walter, and we did not mean any harm by ringing that bell. My family are good people; we would never think of ourselves as racist. But here's the thing: as a person who grew up in a ... privileged white southern community, I have undeniably been shaped by—and benefited from—attitudes that are racist, as have so many of us in this country and among white members of the Jewish community."ⁱⁱ

Reflecting on Rabbi Stoller’s writing, I must confess that the employees who worked in the home in which I was raised or those of family and friends were the only Black people I knew until my school integrated when I was in third grade. As Rabbi Stoller writes, and I quote him only because he says it better, not because my experience was different: “Painful as it is, I have to admit that I grew up with the assumptions that Black people tended to work for white people and came when you rang, that their neighborhoods were scary because the people there were scary, and that many of them needed the paternalistic hand of white people to get a leg up in life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Rabbi Stoller notes that many white people’s views of people of color are shaped by their experiences, often unconsciously and not maliciously intended. Still, unconscious bias—whether racial, gender-based, or something else—brings real harm and undergirds the struggle for justice in this country.

Just this week, the Arkansas General Assembly adopted new congressional district maps that split Pulaski County in three, removing some Black communities of both Little Rock and North Little Rock from our congressional district. When Black legislators complained that the proposed maps diluted Black voting power, some white members of the legislative majority accused them of inserting race into a matter that was merely a numbers game unrelated to race. Senator Jane English of North Little Rock, a sponsor of the new maps, claimed not even to know the racial makeup of parts of her own community. Senator Joyce Elliott responded, “One of the most offensive things anyone can say to me is, ‘I don’t see color,’” since such a comment “erase[s] me to avoid the complexities of our beautiful, diverse humanity.”^{iv} I hasten to note that the matter is not strictly partisan. Governor Hutchinson, who has not committed to signing the redistricting bill, does “see color,” saying, “I have urged [the legislators] to keep in mind that you don’t want to dilute minority representation or influence in congressional races and that is an important factor...that should be considered.”^v

Our “beautiful, diverse humanity,” to repeat Senator Elliott’s moving words, emanates in our biblical story from the descendants of Noah, whose three sons are portrayed as progenitors of different part of the human family.

A little-known story in this portion takes place after the flood. Noah plants a vineyard, harvests its grapes, makes wine, and drinks it. One of his sons, Ham, finds him passed out and naked, and he tells his brothers. Shem and Japheth, the brothers, walk backwards into the tent to cover Noah’s nakedness. Upon

awakening, Noah, embarrassed and outraged by Ham's having told his brothers of his nakedness, places a curse on Ham's son Canaan: "'To his brothers he shall be the basest of slaves.'"^{vi}

As Rabbi Stoller explains, this so-called "curse of Ham" has been misused for ideological purposes for centuries. In the Bible, only one person, Canaan, is cursed to be a servant to his uncles. "However," Rabbi Stoller writes, "according to the slanderous and ideologically driven allegorical reading of this story, ...Noah's curse applies not only to these particular individuals, but to their descendants for all time. On this interpretation, Ham and Canaan represent Black people, while Japheth represents white people—meaning that God has condemned Black people to be subjugated to white people forever." To be sure, Rabbi Stoller continues, "Scholars have thoroughly debunked this interpretation of the story, showing it to be based on an ignorant misreading of the biblical text meant to support the institution of African slavery."^{vii}

You and I might never have heard this horrific distortion of Torah, but we are impacted by it all the same. It was proclaimed widely, particularly in this part of the country, for a very long time and has seeped into the culture. Rabbi Stoller writes, "Attitudes that were taught explicitly at one time in history may later be conveyed implicitly, even unknowingly. But they are there. They are modeled by people we love and admire, people who are kind, and gentle, and do *not* hate. Tragically, these biases have become part of who we are."^{viii}

In the Torah, after decreeing that Canaan must serve his uncles, Noah says, "God will enlarge Japheth."^{ix} A century ago, Rabbi Yaakov Yehudah Aryeh Leib Frankel explained that the Hebrew word translated as "enlarge" really means "to become arrogant and filled with hubris." This superiority complex has become the unconscious racial bias that Rabbi Stoller calls "the curse of Japheth."^x

White Americans can transcend "the curse of Japheth" and work with people of every ethnic origin to erase "the curse of Ham." That will take effort. We will need to acknowledge the implicit bias that afflicts us. Annabelle Imber Tuck has suggested that we avail ourselves of implicit bias training now offered through the Central Conference of American Rabbis. We will need to devote ourselves to seeking out friendships, real relationships, across racial lines. Then, we may "see color"—celebrating, not erasing, the diversity that makes America great.

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi A. Brian Stoller, “Unconscious Racial Bias and the Curse of Japheth,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 11.

ⁱⁱ Stoller, p. 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stoller, p. 11.

^{iv} Joyce Elliott, Facebook post, October 7, 2012.

^v Rachel Herzog and Jeannie Roberts, “Congressional map heads to final vote,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, October 7, 2021.

^{vi} Genesis 9:25

^{vii} Stoller, p. 10.

^{viii} Stoller, p. 11.

^{ix} Genesis 9:27.

^x Stoller, pp. 10-11.