

We're All in This Together

Yom Kippur Morning 5784

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In 2021, David Ronnel, then a high school junior, led a successful campaign, together with his father and a statewide Jewish Federation committee, to require Holocaust education in Arkansas public schools. As a participant with the committee, I was assigned a task: Garnering endorsement letters from leading Arkansas interfaith clergy. After that mission was accomplished with all-but-unanimous support, I suggested an additional duty for myself. With Steve Ronnel's blessing, I sought cosponsors among members of the Legislative Black Caucus.

That second task was more challenging than I expected. Yes, Black members of the Senate and House agreed that Holocaust education is important and should be required. Still, the legislation was a bitter pill for them. Senator Joyce Elliott and I have worked together extensively, and we trust one another, so she explained: Slavery, peonage, racist terror lynching, convict leasing, and Jim Crow happened right here in Arkansas, and yet African American history is often taught poorly and inaccurately across the state.

I was unaware of that issue—way back in 2021. I nevertheless quickly realized that I should not be surprised. I told Senator Elliott: We hoped that Holocaust education would combat antisemitism and Holocaust denial and move the needle on Arkansas's rating, dead last in a ranking of Holocaust awareness among high school students. Another goal, though, was that Holocaust education might combat bigotry more broadly. Still, I realized that was not enough. I pledged support for similar legislation to require that Arkansas public schools approach Black history with the same honest and thorough approach we were advocating for Holocaust education. Senator Elliott acknowledged that she knew that the Jewish community and I would be allies. She emphasized that there was no *quid pro quo* when she and others from the Black Caucus cosponsored the Holocaust education bill and supported it with their votes.

The Talmud teaches that all Jewish people are responsible for one another.ⁱ These words continue to rally us to our people's needs. For example, though the Temple charges tuition for Religious School, that fee only covers a fraction of the cost, most of which is made up by congregants' annual pledges, and Temple and the Federation make scholarships available. We are **all** responsible for **every** Jewish child's Jewish future.

In the world of our sages, our people were isolated from and often persecuted by their neighbors. Jews needed to depend on one another, for they could depend on nobody else. However, as our experience with Holocaust

education legislation illustrates, we are blessed to live at a unique moment in Jewish history. We can and do call on the wider community for support, and we value opportunities to serve beyond the congregation—by hosting the Interfaith Center’s Friendship Camp this summer, with our school backpack and Thanksgiving basket projects, by dependably showing up to cook and serve meals at Our House on the fourth Wednesday of each month, and by cosponsoring an Afghan refugee family with Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, to name only a few examples. We rely upon our community, across religious lines, to achieve our own priorities, and we invite our neighbors to depend on us. We would have it no other way.

The linkage is driven home in *The Flight Portfolio*, a novel by Julie Orringer,ⁱⁱ which was our Al Barron Book Club’s selection for August. The main character, Varian Fry, is a real historical figure, an American Christian honored by Yad Vashem as one of the righteous among the nations. Fry was among the founders of the Emergency Rescue Committee, which freed thousands of artists, musicians, writers, and other noted intellectuals from the grip of the Nazis and their collaborators in Vichy France in the early 1940s.

But *The Flight Portfolio* is a novel. In the book’s opening pages, Fry encounters a fictional character named Grant, a man with whom he had a mutual love affair during their college days. Throughout the novel, the story of the two men’s relationship is interwoven with their rescue work. Carrying on a same-sex relationship can be as dangerous as undermining the Nazis. We recall that, like Jews, gay men and lesbians were victims of the Holocaust, put to death for being the people God created them to be. The novel drives home the teaching that marginalized people’s fates are linked.

Thirty-six times, the Torah calls upon us to “remember the stranger, for [we] were strangers in Egypt.” The message is that our history of persecution obligates Jews to pay attention when others are oppressed as we once were. The trouble with that interpretation is that it places our oppression in the past. We may indeed be thankful that we do not live in Pharaoh’s Egypt, Haman’s Persia, Hadrian’s Judea, Torquemada’s Spain, Hitler’s Europe, or even Henry Ford’s America. Still, the rise of antisemitism in the U.S. today, coming from the extremes of the left and right, painfully reminds us that we still can be regarded as less than fully American, other than fully human. The Talmudic injunction might be altered accordingly: All marginalized people are responsible for one another.

Jewish Americans have responded accordingly. Jewish individuals and organizations are on the front lines, or at least right behind them, as millions of American seek to combat white supremacy and its assaults on gay, lesbian, and

transgender Americans, on African Americans and their history, on reproductive justice and women's rights more broadly, among other struggles.

But we risk ignoring others.

New York *Times* columnist David Brooks made his readers uncomfortable with his column, asking in its title, “What if We’re the Bad Guys Here?” By “we,” Brooks means college-educated Americans who oppose former President Trump—whether a moderate conservative, like Brooks, or somewhere else on the political spectrum. “The story begins in the 1960s, when high school grads had to go off to fight in Vietnam but the children of the educated class got college deferments... The ideal that we’re all in this together was replaced with the reality that the educated class lives in a world up here and everybody else is forced into a world down there. Members of our class are always publicly speaking out for the marginalized, but somehow we always end up building systems that serve ourselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Brooks’s point is vividly driven home by Barbara Kingsolver in her 2023 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Demon Copperhead*,^{iv} a retelling of Dickens’ *David Copperfield* told from the point of view of a white Appalachian boy who grows up in poverty and surrounded by rampant opioid addiction. Kingsolver’s message to college-educated progressives like herself is clear: We close our eyes to the plight of low-income, less educated Americans at their peril and our own. If Jewish history bequeaths to us a special responsibility for **all** marginalized people, and it does, then these Americans and their struggles must prompt us to the front lines, no less than fighting racism, homophobia, transphobia, abortion bans, and censorship.

Next month, with thanks to the Clinton Foundation and the diligent work of Annabelle Tuck and Sue Weinstein, our Jewish community is set to hold an important program on the opioid addiction. I hope you will plan to join us at Congregation Agudath Achim on October 22 at 2pm. We will be reminded, all too painfully, that our community has been directly touched by this tragic scourge. At the same time, we know that the well-educated, well-healed owners of Purdue Pharma perpetrated a heinous plot to enrich themselves, conspiring with an octopus-like network of pill-pushers with medical degrees, preying primarily on vulnerable, less educated Americans.

In this morning’s Haftarah, the prophet excoriates the elite of his own day. They scrupulously observe their ritual obligations, all the while trampling on the rights of their workers, the vulnerable in their midst. The prophet doesn’t say, because it would be obvious to his listeners, that the people they are oppressing are

Judeans, just like themselves, the people whom Talmudic sages would later emphasize are part of their responsibility.

Today, I am speaking to myself, among a community that is punctilious in advocacy for the rights of the oppressed, an obligation that we consider no less important than our Yom Kippur ritual observance. We understand that “we” and “they” are one and the same, and not only because Jews are vulnerable to white supremacy. We also know that people whose rights are threatened—women, gay men, lesbians, transgender and nonbinary folks, people of color, I could go on—are in our midst. “They” are part of “we.” Our Temple membership is also more socioeconomically diverse than some may realize, proudly including hardworking Arkansans at every level of income and education, including plenty who are not among what David Brooks calls “the educated class.” “They,” too, are part of who we are.

Brooks’s headline, “What If We’re the Bad Guys Here?” is “clickbait,” purposefully overstating the case. On Yom Kippur, we recognize that none of us is **all good or bad**. We are each to view ourselves as if we live on the edge between good and evil. Our very next act will tip the balance. Today, let us pledge that our next move will be to take up the causes of people whose views and priorities may not always align with our own but who are at least as likely to be marginalized as we are. Then, we will affirm, in word and in deed: We are all in this together.

Amen.

ⁱ Babylonian Talmud, *Sh’vu’ot* 39a.

ⁱⁱ Julie Orringer, *The Flight Portfolio*, Knopf, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Brooks, “What If We’re the Bad Guys Here?” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/opinion/trump-meritocracy-educated.html>.

^{iv} Barbara Kingsolver, *Demon Copperhead*, Harper, 2022.