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# SOCIAL JUSTICE: A CALL FOR COMPASSION AND JUSTICE

As we hear the sacred blasts of the shofar's call, I am always struck by the power of how such a simple instrument can evoke such a wide and deep range of emotions, thoughts, and hopes, both personal and communal.

As our tradition teaches, the sound of the shofar can literally break down the walls, both physical and spiritual. It can shatter complacency and indifference, move us from the narrow to the expansive, and inspire us to move forward while simultaneously remembering the past. It also reminds us that words can only go so far but a cry for compassion, justice, and forgiveness takes concrete action.

As we look forward to the New Year of 5785, I am excited to share some of the Torah from the Social Justice Commission of Conservative/Masorti Judaism. We are the central address for our Movement's social justice efforts, bringing together rabbis of the RA, cantors, USCJ, Women's League, Men's Clubs, USY, and our Seminaries to organize, educate, and advocate on behalf of a wide range of social justice issues.

We believe that by coming together we can not only amplify our collective energy but also bring our unique understanding of Torah to the Holy work we do. I hope you find meaning in this Machzor supplement and sign-up for our monthly SJC newsletter.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu v'Tikateimu!  
Rabbi Michael Singer

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# A MEDITATION/KAVANNAH ON THE SHOFAR AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Rabbi Josh Ratner

The shofar is a clarion call to alertness and action. Its piercing notes awaken us from the slumber of our lives, penetrating our souls and jarring our individual and collective complacency. Its prophetic cry demands that we move from disinterest and powerlessness to transformative action.

On this Rosh Hashanah, less than a month before America’s national elections, may the shofar also shatter our apathy towards civic engagement. May the strong and powerful *t’kiya* blast awaken us to our moral responsibility to vote. May the mournful, broken *sh’varim* notes inspire us to support our besieged civic infrastructure by serving as poll workers on election day. May the staccato, rapid *t’ruah* sounds remind us how many citizens are at risk of disenfranchisement and compel us to help others exercise their right to vote through outreach to low-propensity voters, through combating misinformation campaigns, and through condemnation of racist, sexist, anti-semitic, or other derogatory statements made about candidates.

The blessing we recite before the shofar is blown on Rosh Hashanah commands each of us to heed the call of the shofar. To listen, intently, to its righteous sound. This year, what will be heard? Can we pause from talking within our siloed-off circles long enough to discern the pangs of our beleaguered democratic norms?

There is so much that we can do to make a difference. As Rabbi Tarfon famously stated in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of our Ancestors) 2:16: “You are not obliged to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” If we heed the shofar’s urgent call and break free of our indifferent, lackadaisical shackles, each of us can declare *hineni*—here I am—and take direct, non-partisan action to repair our frayed civic institutions. May the shofar

blasts this Rosh Hashanah become our catalysts for demanding “freedom throughout the land for all its inhabitants” (Leviticus 25:10), inspiring us to civic participation and the preservation of our democracy.

## CARING FOR CREATION PRAYER

Rabbis Nina Beth Cardin and Avram Israel Reisner

<p>רבונו של עולם,          כְּלִימָה שִׁבְרָאָתָּה,          לֹא בְרָאָתָּ דְבַר אֶחָד          לְבִטְלָהּ.          אֲוִיר לְנִשְׁימָה,          מַיִם לְשִׁתִּיָּהּ          וְיֶרֶחַ צֶמְחָה,          אֲדָמָה לְמַחְיָהּ          וְיִלְכֹּלְכָלָהּ,          צְמֻחִים וְחַיִּים          לְרוּחָהּ,          וְאָדָם לְעִבְדָּהּ          וְיִלְשְׁמָרָהּ.          תָּן בְּלִבְנוּ כְּלִיּוֹם לְעֶסֶק          בְּאוֹצְרֶךָ          בְּאַמּוֹנָה,          וְכֹן נְקִיִּים          רְצוֹנֶיךָ          כְּדַבְּרֵי נְבִיאֶיךָ: לֹא תִהְיֶה          כְּרֶאֱשִׁי          לְשִׁבְתֵּי יִצְרָהּ:          יִשְׁעִיהָ מִ"ה: י"ח</p>	<p>God,          everything You have          made          has a purpose:          air for breathing,          water for drinking and          bathing,          land for living and          growing,          plants and animals in          gracious abundance,          and humanity to work          and          care for Your earth.          Inspire us every day to          care          Faithfully          for Your treasure,          so that we may fulfill          Your vision:          Not as a wasteland did          God create the earth,          but as a home where we          may live” (Isaiah          45:18).</p>
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# HAGAR, ENSLAVED WOMAN

Rabbi Amy Eilberg

Traveling recently on a Racial Justice Pilgrimage of leaders of the Conservative/Masorti movement, I visited a remarkable place called the Whitney Plantation. The Whitney is one of a large number of extant plantations - former slave-labor camps where enslaved Black Americans were forced to work.

Unlike the plantations that are maintained as event venues without regard to their history, Whitney has been transformed into an educational center whose mission is to educate the public about the history and legacies of slavery in the United States. Visitors deconstruct romanticized versions of what plantation life was like, take in the depth of depravity of the system of slavery, and read first-person accounts of the experiences of enslaved people.

The visit was a life-changing experience, emotionally akin to visiting a Holocaust museum. I “heard” the voices of the slaves describing beatings and unimaginable cruelty. I imagined them trying to flee or despairing of the impossibility of doing so. I pictured children growing up, deprived of their human birthright. Months after our visit, I still think of Whitney when I am reminded of the reality of slavery. My experience there cannot help but impact how I read Torah.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read Genesis Chapter 21, the second part of the story of Hagar and Ishmael. In the first part, in Genesis 16, Sarai (before her name change) had given “Hagar the Egyptian,” her maidservant, to Avram as a “wife” (“*isha*”), often translated as “concubine.” Sarai seems to have appointed Hagar as a kind of surrogate mother, since she herself could not bear Avram’s child. But the text tells us that, after becoming pregnant, Hagar was disdainful of Sarai. Sarai was hurt and angry and verbally abused Hagar.

Hagar, pregnant with Ishmael, fled into the wilderness.

In Chapter 21, the Rosh Hashanah reading, Sarah and Abraham (ages 90 and 100) celebrate the miraculous birth of their son Isaac. One would have thought that Sarah’s desperate pain about her infertility would have been eased now that she had a child of her own. But the text tells us that she sees Ishmael, son of “Hagar the Egyptian,” “playing.” (Many commentators strangely understand this to refer to a sexual assault, perhaps to justify Sarah’s extreme response.)

Sarah, enraged, demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael. This time, Sarah refers to Hagar as “*ha’amah hazot*,” “that slave woman.” Hagar and Ishmael are sent away with just a bit of food and water. Hagar cries out desperately as she sees her son dying, until miraculously, God calls out to Hagar and promises that her son, too, will be blessed.

Reading this text with a heightened awareness of the realities of slavery, a new level of meaning reveals itself to me. The text variously refers to Hagar as a “*shifcha*” (usually translated “maidservant”), “*isha*” (in the sense of “concubine” to Avram), and, most strikingly, “*amah*” (generally the feminine form of “*eved*” or slave, as in Exodus 20:10, Leviticus 25:6, and Deuteronomy 5:18, to name just a few examples). Consistently, Hagar is referred to as “Hagar the Egyptian.” She may be darker-skinned; she is definitely “other.”

Imagine that, consistent with the mores of the time, Avram and Sarai had slaves. Laws articulated later in the Torah assured that slaves would be treated with somewhat more fairness than in non-Israelite societies, but they were still slaves. In our text, Hagar’s body is used to assuage Sarai’s pain

## SOCIAL JUSTICE: A CALL FOR COMPASSION AND JUSTICE

over infertility, and then when Hagar has feelings about her ability to conceive, she is abused for it. Back in the household, Hagar is distinctly inferior, as is her son, Ishmael, despite Abraham's mixed feelings. Sarah casts out Hagar and Ishmael to face certain death in the wilderness. But for divine intervention, that would have been the end of their story.

I now picture Hagar as a young, enslaved woman, working from morning till night to please her masters, without agency or dignity. I imagine her being fed and housed in the slaves' quarters, not in the generous home of her masters. I ponder Ishmael's status as the son of the master and his enslaved sexual partner. And so, when discomfort arises in the household, it becomes clear that he is inferior and expendable.

When Hagar is sent out into the wilderness, I picture an enslaved mother and child fleeing from their masters, knowing that they will face savage beating or death if caught. Yet their courage and desperate desire for freedom move them to take the ultimate risk. Somewhere inside, they know that they deserve better and dream of being treated as fully equal human beings. And perhaps they believed that God would protect them from harm.

To be clear, I share this reading of the text not to indict Abraham and Sarah. I visualize our ancestors Abraham and Sarah as people of their time — spiritual exemplars in some ways but ordinary humans in others, blinded by the

constructed social assumptions of their time. Also, in Torah law, enslaved Israelites were essentially indentured servants, not permanent chattel, as in American slavery. (Non-Israelite slaves were, in fact, treated as the owners' property.) Much later in Jewish history, the Rabbis contracted the category of slavery further, eventually abolishing it altogether.

Rather, I share this reading to encourage all of us to wake up when we see language and law related to slavery in our Torah. We must not envision slavery merely as an ancient mythic category, like the enslaved people pictured in Hollywood movies. When we see evidence of slavery in the Torah, we must pause and experience the horror of it and be reminded that we are called to eradicate every vestige of it from the society in which we live. As we learn from racial justice attorney Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative, slavery never fully ended in our country. It morphed into other forms, including racial terror and lynching, segregation, and the mass incarceration of people of color in our own time.

This Rosh Hashanah, the Hagar story raises searing contemporary questions for each of us to consider. Who is the Hagar of today? How is she treated? Who will intervene and save her from her masters' cruelty?

May these sacred Days of Awe lead us to understand more deeply and act more forcefully on behalf of those enslaved and marginalized in our own society.

# APPROACHING TASHLIKH: CASTING OFF RACISM

Rabbi Dr. J.B. Sacks

Communal Ritual of Tashlikh to Cast Out the Sin of Racism

Framing and Instructions for the conveners:

This Tashlikh ritual addresses the community's involvement in the sin of racism. The ritual should be done just before or after the community gathers for Tashlikh so that each person or family can do their personal ritual of the traditional Tashlikh. People should bring regular bread for the personal Tashlikh component.

Notwithstanding the above, for symbolic and dramatic reasons, we recommend communities provide a long, oversized hallah for this special ritual. The larger hallah represents the vast category of racism as sinfulness. Like this egregious sin, the hallah has many bumps and permutations. It represents the fact that we all have participated in, been hurt by, or benefited from this sin, the solution for which lies in our hands.

If this is not practicable, invite people to bring a whole hallah, one that is big and puffy like a Shabbat hallah and not merely a round holy day hallah. Mini-hallahot will work fine, particularly for small households.

Read to the community by the conveners at the outset of the communal ritual:

Tashlikh means "to cast out." The brief ceremony traditionally asks us to commit to casting out our personal sins and dramatizes our commitment publicly by casting bread into the waters. Water is a traditional agent effectuating change, so by casting bread upon the waters, we are stating that we will not stop working on our sins until a true, deep change within us has occurred.

While we can do Tashlikh for a variety of reasons, in this ritual, we want to have a particular focus on the ongoing scourge of racism. In doing this, we enlarge the scope of Tashlikh from a primarily

personal commitment to better oneself to a communal commitment to transform our culture. That can start with ourselves and includes ourselves, but casting out the sin of racism requires a collective will and concerted effort.

May our casting of the bread upon the waters lead to a concerted common effort to confront and confound racism throughout the New Year.

Instruction: One or more persons should read slowly and consider pausing for a few seconds at the designated places (or places they feel more comfortable with) to give the community time to take in the words and the moment. If more than one person is reading, consider having them staged at various places to recognize that racism is found everywhere.

What sets hallah apart is its puffiness.

In this season of teshuvah—repair and return—

Let us notice the puffiness of the hallah and the puffiness of our hearts.

[pause briefly]

Puffiness is a metaphor for arrogance.

Let us note well the puffiness of the deep and entrenched arrogance of racism.

Let us note the puffiness of the arrogance within us that hesitates to look at the roles of Jews in maintaining racism.

[pause briefly]

Whether a particular white Jew owned a slave or not,

all white Jews benefited from slavery, and white Jews continue to have a certain level of privilege because of it.

Let us note the puffiness of our pride.

Let us note the puffiness of our privilege.

[pause briefly]

## SOCIAL JUSTICE: A CALL FOR COMPASSION AND JUSTICE

The puffiness of the hallah  
also symbolizes the puffiness of the wounds and  
welts  
on bodies  
that resulted from the whippings and beatings  
of slaves  
and Black free persons.  
Black people in this country always lived  
under the threat of physical violence.  
That violence was never commensurate  
with any wrong Black persons did.  
Indeed, physical threats and violence  
often occurred with no provocation whatsoever.  
Let us note the puffiness of white fear.  
Let us note the puffiness of white violence.

[pause briefly]  
Finally, the puffiness of the hallah  
represents the swollen eyes  
that resulted from tears  
shed by so many  
for so long  
living under a racist system,  
our American system.  
Let us note  
the pain of our fellow Black citizens,  
our fellow Black Jews.  
Let us note the pain that continues from an  
endemic racism  
that we rarely speak about and have never  
addressed.

[pause briefly]  
As we cast this hallah into the waters,  
we commit ourselves to casting off the puffiness  
of racism,  
the arrogance that doesn't let us see the fullness  
of racism's reach, and the arrogance that  
deflects us from helping our culture to change  
course.  
Let us support, elevate, and teach each other  
about racism.  
Let us strive to greater awareness of the pain and  
worry  
with which Black Americans live and contend  
daily. [pause briefly]  
Let us cast out this puffy hallah today,  
and let us work every day  
to cast off racism from among us and within us,  
until the hope of our Rosh Hashanah prayers is  
realized,  
that all Americans  
יעשו כולם אגדה אחת לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם  
*yei-a-su kbulam agudah ehat b'leivav shalem,*  
that all Americans will live united in one  
fellowship,  
one bond,  
beating fully with one heart,  
a heart that is healed  
and whole.

[pause briefly]

Amen.

# THE SHOFAR IS CALLING US TOWARD QUEER RECONCILIATION: A KAVVANAH

puckmaren glass and Rabbi Dr. J.B. Sacks

I anticipate the call of the shofar, and I am filled with a sense of awe and gratitude for the opportunity to awaken: awaken not only to a sound so familiar I know it in my bones, a sound that calls me back to my truest self, but a call that reminds me that our world is not yet perfect, and a part of my task in this life is to partner with God to make the world better than it is today. The shofar, with its ancient and resonant call, serves as a spiritual alarm clock, urging us to open our hearts and minds to the diverse voices and experiences that enrich our lives. These are voices that live within me, around me, and beyond me.

The shofar calls us to action, to see the needs of our communities, to respond to bigotry and violence, to condemn hate in all its forms, and to step into creating the world the way God wants to see it—the way we have been dreaming about since before dreams were dreamt.

In this moment of quiet before the shofar's piercing sound, I recall the identities and stories and colors that make up our many communities. I imagine a world where all our communities hold each other dear because we have learned that love has no bound, no gender, no one right way.

The queer community is a testament to resilience, creativity, and love. It challenges norms and expands our understanding of what it means to be human. By embracing and celebrating this diversity, we honor the divine spark within each person.

However, acknowledging the queer community is only a beginning.

The shofar's call also reminds us of our responsibility to address this community's needs and challenges. Queer individuals still encounter discrimination, marginalization, and violence. They struggle for acceptance and equality in various spheres of life, including healthcare, employment, and housing. They serve as a political punching bag, the butt of jokes, and a group to Other. As a community committed to justice and compassion, we hear these voices in the shofar's calls and commit to take action to create a more inclusive, equitable, and loving world.

God's world.

The shofar's call urges us to examine our own biases and privileges, to stand in solidarity and to advocate for change. It reminds us that true allyship requires more than words; it demands ongoing commitment and tangible support.

As I prepare to hear the shofar's call—its pain and its urging, I am called to hope and to determination.

May its call inspire us to wake up to the beauty of our rich community and to actively work towards meeting its needs.

Let us build a world where everyone, regardless of their identity, can live with dignity, love, and joy.

May the sound of the shofar echo beyond our own hearing and into the actions we will use to change the world.

*Kein y'hi ratzon.* So may it be.

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# PROMOTING ISAIAH ON YOM KIPPUR

Rabbi Daniel Isaak

“It is to share your food with the hungry.” (Isaiah 57:7)

Sung by a chorus of poor orphan boys, the lyrics “Food, Glorious Food” remain unforgettable. The 1960 Broadway adaptation of Charles Dickens’s 1838 novel *Oliver Twist* opens as the hungry boys line up for dinner. Served nothing but a diet of mere gruel, they take solace in imagining a richer menu.

There’s nothing to stop us from  
getting a thrill,  
When we all close our eyes and  
imagine,  
Food, Glorious Food!

Hunger is devastating and cruel. Those who persist on a limited or insufficient diet can literally think of nothing else but “from where will my next meal come?”

Hungry children cannot learn, and undernourished infants will not develop healthy bodies. Parents starve themselves in order to feed their young. We know that persistent hunger shortens lives. And yet, despite the production in America of more than sufficient amounts of nutritious food for all, hunger persists. Hunger, unlike so many of our major social challenges, is an easily remediable problem.

Food plays a central role in Jewish life. We gather with family and friends in our homes for festive Shabbat and Holy Day meals. Joyous life cycle events conclude with a *Seudat Mitzvah*, a celebratory meal, and mourners return home to a *Seudat Havra’ah*, a meal of consolation. Special foods are designated for virtually every holy day: apples and honey for Rosh Hashanah, blintzes for Shavuot, potato pancakes or jelly donuts for Hanukah. We exchange sweets for Purim and prepare all kinds of unique foods for our Passover Seder.

Yet our Jewish tradition teaches us that those who are without must never be far from our consciousness. At the outset of our Seder ritual we extend an invitation, “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” In response to this call many communities

see to it that everyone who desires has a family Seder to attend.

Less well-known traditions include *Maot Hittim*, flour money, collected so that everyone can afford to buy Matzah. On Purim, people would offer *Matanot leEvyonim*, offerings for the poor. A *pushke*, *tzedakah* Box is available in nearly every Jewish home.

The fast of Yom Kippur demands no special foods, though families create customs for the meal prior to the fast and for breaking it at the end of the day. Among the many explanations for why we fast are to sensitize us that there are those in our midst who experience hunger not just one day, but every day.

However, it is Isaiah’s tirade which calls us to action. We read his words as the Haftarah each Yom Kippur morning. As we gather already engaged in our fast, Isaiah shouts at the top of his lungs **that a mere ritual fast is not what God desires**. The fast can only be effective when accompanied by acts of social justice: “feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless,” he cries.

## Operation Isaiah

In direct response to the prophet Isaiah’s demand, many Conservative synagogues urge their attendees to come to Kol Nidre services bearing bags of non-perishable food to be distributed to local food banks and soup kitchens. By so doing we dramatically begin the new Jewish year placing the Mitzvah of hunger relief at the top of our collective agenda.

There are children in America who go to bed hungry because of a lack of national will. Since fruit and vegetables, meat and fish are readily available in abundance, access to nutritious food must be considered a basic human right. Our symbolic gesture through Operation Isaiah is a demand to eliminate the scourge of hunger. May we see the day when the availability of healthy food is available to all.



# A RACIAL JUSTICE VIDUI/CONFESSIONAL

Rabbi Cantor Michael McCloskey

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ,  
תְּבֹא לְפָנֶיךָ תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ,  
וְאַל תִּתְעַלֵּם מִתְחַנְּנֵנוּ,  
שֶׁאִין אֲנַחְנוּ עֲזִי פְּנִים וְקָשִׁי עֵרֶף לֹאמַר לְפָנֶיךָ,  
ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ,  
צְדִיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חָטְאנוּ.  
אֲבָל, אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ חָטְאנוּ :

Our God and God of our ancestors,  
Let our prayer come before You,  
And don't hide Yourself from our supplication,  
for we aren't so brazen-faced or stiff-necked to  
declare before You, Adonai, our God and God of  
our ancestors,  
We are righteous ones and have not erred.  
Truly, we and our ancestors have erred.

As confession is one of the first steps of restitution, (Leviticus 5:5)  
And Judaism teaches that “we are responsible for the errors of our ancestors when we hold onto them,”  
(Sifra)  
Perpetuate them,  
Repurpose them,  
Or simply allow them to go unaddressed,  
We offer this contemporary “Ashamnu,” for we have erred.  
With some of these sins we continue to engage,  
Others are part of America’s complex historical narrative,  
Prosperity built upon the backs of enslaved and exiled peoples.  
We own these narratives:

Slave Auctions, **Bias** (explicit and implicit), **Convict Leasing** **De facto** segregation, **White**  
**Exceptionalism**, **Forced Displacement**, **Gerrymandering**, **Hegemonic Oppression**, **Institutional Racism**,  
**Jim Crow**, **Ku Klux Klan**, **Lynching**, **Microaggressions**, **White Nationalism**, **Optical Allyship**, **Predatory**  
**Lending**, **Quelching Black Voices**, **Racial Profiling**, **Sundown towns**, **Tokenism**, **Underserving minorities**,  
**Voter Suppression**, **White fragility**, **Xenophobia**, **Youth Incarceration**, **Racial Zoning** (or **Redlining**).