

Yom Kippur 5781: The Redness of Our Blood
By Rabbi Megan Brudney

“It only kills old people anyway,” the young doctor said to my 72-year-old grandmother. Miffed, she recounted this interaction to me over the phone. “I could have a good 20 years left!” My grandmother mails me homemade quilts. She cares daily for my disabled mother...Her presence adds richness to the world. I dream of a future in which I can see her again, and in which others see her as more than expendable¹.

More than expendable.

More than expendable.

These words, which were written by Shayna Fleming and published in the New York Times Tiny Love Stories column—these words clearly reference the pandemic—but they’re not actually about the pandemic at all. They’re about the value of human life. About our assumptions about the value of human life. About what our society thinks makes a life more valuable, more worth living, more worth saving, or, to the contrary...more expendable.

Many of us are familiar with the Jewish idea of *pikuach nefesh*—that the sanctity of life is paramount above all else. In our Talmud there is a key teaching that demonstrates not just the value of all life but the EQUAL value of all life²: A person comes before Rabba, a well-known sage, and tells him: “a local official has told me I must kill another

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/08/style/tiny-modern-love-stories-the-loneliness-he-made-me-feel.html>

² Sanhedrin 74a

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person in town—or the official is going to kill me. What should I do?”
Rabba answers: “It is preferable that he should kill you and you
should not kill. For who is to say that your blood is redder than his?
Perhaps his blood is redder.”

This text is extreme, shocking, and also devastating in its simplicity. It's unacceptable to prioritize one life over another EVEN when one of the lives IS YOUR OWN. [Which sounds CRAZY!] But how brilliant is the metaphor of the redness of a person's blood?! There's none of the Talmud's signature squabbling over what makes a life important, then a hierarchical ranking of any such determinants, then a discussion of how to quantify each attribute...and likewise there's no dissenting opinion noted only to be knocked down. Just the simple, undeniable fact of the blood in our veins. And I'll have you know that I consulted with a doctor (Dr. Anna Valentine) on this and indeed, the color that a human being bleeds is quite consistent throughout all of humanity—with practically no variance due to any factor at all, be it diet, age, ethnicity, race...there's not even any illnesses that change the color of one's blood, to the naked eye at least. The Talmud and modern medicine thus agree: No person's blood is any redder than anyone else's.

Yet how, then, does it trip off the tongue so easily to dismiss people, to dismiss lives, red-blooded lives, with words like the ones used by that doctor to that woman? “It only kills old people, anyway.” “It's just the elderly who need to be extra careful.” “Many of the people who died were senior citizens.” The subtext of these statements is clear: the speaker believes that the lives of the elderly just don't

matter as much as the lives of people who happen, purely by chance, to be younger.

As people who are Jewish, or Jewish adjacent, or curious about Judaism, or interested in supporting someone who fits into one of those categories, we know all too well what it means for our lives not to matter, or to matter less than other lives. There is a story of famed Italian Holocaust survivor and professor Primo Levi who would begin class by saying: They came for the barbers and for the Jews. There was only one follow-up question that was ever asked in response, which is the same question I would assume many of you are asking in your heads right now—why would they come for the barbers? No one thinks to ASK why they come for the Jews. No one. Even in our own minds there's this assumption of Jewish guilt, this acceptance of a world that at times denies our full humanity. A world that sees Jews in pain or in danger and not only looks away but also justifies mistreatment with lies and propaganda to hastily explain why something that is so clearly wrong is actually completely acceptable.

But even Jews, who know this situation so viscerally well, are also sadly capable of debasing the lives of others. Even way back in the Torah. One of the most heartbreaking moments in the book of Genesis is when Esau, son of our forebears Isaac and Rebecca, twin brother of Jacob, is shunted aside and dehumanized after Jacob sins against him and tricks him out of his birthright and his blessing from his father—things that both rightfully belong to Esau. Yet we hold up Jacob as our hero, even as the text plainly shows that Esau's worst crime is letting hunger cloud his judgment. We hold up Jacob as our

hero, ignoring or erasing from the story Esau's palpable, full-throated grief when he finds out that Jacob has stolen his rightful blessing. Esau bursts into wild and bitter sobs, and says to [Isaac], "Bless me too, Father!"³...and then [adds], "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"⁴ [and then asks again]: ..."Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!" and weeps aloud⁵.

We don't talk much about that heart-wrenching begging, about how even after this incident, Esau still tries vainly to please his parents, one of whom masterminded his betrayal. Esau is (or was) a fully red-blooded member of our literal family, and yet our rabbinic commentaries somehow take no interest in holding Jacob accountable for cheating him—they're much busier conjuring up back stories explaining why Esau in fact deserved to be abused and thrown away. Our sages make it amply clear that Esau was no angel—an argument that seems utterly farcical to anyone familiar with our tradition, which was founded exclusively by emphatic non-angels...and might I add, it's not like there was an angels-only clause for the legal transfer of birthrights or blessings. But Esau saw, and moreover felt, with his heart that beat red blood, how little his life mattered in comparison to his brother's. He conceded defeat and left us to build a new, successful life as the founder of the Edomite people.

Yet—as I shared a little about on Rosh Hashanah—ultimately Jacob's conscience catches up with him. He wrestles all night with the angel

³ Gen. 27:34

⁴ Gen. 27:36

⁵ Gen. 27:38

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who can't even (whom you might remember from last week) and as morning breaks he knows he's on the verge of coming face to face with Esau, who as far as Jacob knows is still filled with murderous rage at him. Esau appears, Jacob humbly bows low to the ground seven times, and then he waits, frozen in silent panic. I can imagine Jacob's heart pounding in his chest, the uncomfortable prickly warmth of when you know you're wrong, the seconds ticking by like minutes as he waits to find out his fate. Then Esau runs to him, seizes upon him, and kisses him, and they both cry. Jacob tells his brother—the brother he years ago misled, took advantage of, and stole everything from: To see your face is like seeing the face of God⁶. In an instant—a decades overdue instant—Jacob suddenly sees clearly the redness of Esau's blood. The redness of his blood and the rightness of his grievance. And in the redness, and in the rightness, and in Esau's sublime willingness to forgive him anyway, Jacob sees God Godself.

Don't we all want to see God Godself, (or for the less God-inclined,) experience some earthly manifestation of a Higher Power?! And according to this story, all you need to do to get there is to fully recognize the humanity of a person who has been smeared as bad, painted in the worst possible light, and blamed for their own exploitation. (Just like Jews have been!)

And so I ask:

Whose red blood are we ignoring?

⁶ Gen. 33:10

Whose red blood are we denying?

Whose red blood have we deemed is in fact *too* human because the person who shed it was “no angel”?

Whose red blood are we saying, implicitly or explicitly, by word or by deed, deliberately or inadvertently, does not matter?

Obviously that phrasing strikes a certain chord at this particular moment, as Black Lives Matter has become a rallying cry in the ongoing fight against systemic racism...and what IS racism but a persistent refusal to accept (or even consider) the redness of many people’s blood all in one fell swoop. And, while we’re on the topic, let us not forget that Black and Jewish are not mutually exclusive identities and that we must acknowledge the racism suffered by Jews of Color from both within and without our community.

But when we refuse to do that—when we close our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts to People of Color—we miss an opportunity to see the face of God.

Just like when we close our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts to the elderly—we miss an opportunity to see the face of God.

Just like when we close our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts to the disabled, the chronically ill, the LGBTQ+, the poor—we miss an opportunity to see the face of God.

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And in this fraught, fractured, impossible moment in time—we so badly need the divine presence and the divine inspiration that comes from bridging these gaps. In a time of such great vulnerability for all of us just trying to make it to the next day or month or year—what an incredibly powerful feeling it would be to know NOT that we're invincible (because we're not)—but rather to know that no matter what happens, our own blood will still be seen as red. To know the security of believing wholeheartedly that we personally would never be viewed as expendable, because NO ONE in our society would be viewed as expendable?!

We can build this society. We can adjust our own mindsets, query our own assumptions, and identify our own prejudices. We can raise up our voices to question others who do not. We can choose to support organizations and businesses that honor the sanctity of all lives. We can vote this November for candidates up and down the ballot whose policies reflect the inherent equality of all lives.

We can build this society together. And if we do, if we commit to seeing the redness of each other's blood across any lines that might otherwise divide us...perhaps 5781 can be the year when we all see the face of God in one another.

AMEN