

"IF I AM FOR MYSELF ALONE, WHAT AM I?"

THE BLACK TERROR

Temple Beth Am - High Holy Days

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In the book "Moby Dick", the great American author Herman Melville, describes the terror of the great white whale. Melville tells us that white is the most awesome color, because it contains all the other colors, and because it is not really a color at all. In modern America, however, the color considered most awesome is black, because it is the skin color of the Negro, whom an increasing number of Americans see as a menace to our society.

Black is the threatening color to Americans, because you can't tell what is happening behind the color black. It seems to be passive and unemotional, and, then, all of a sudden, cities aflame! - Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit. In recent months, the Negro has appeared to the white American in the form of a murderer, an arsonist, a plunderer. Jews in this country have not only been threatened because they are white men reacting as white men, Jews have also been subject to black anti-semitism, climaxed by the raving of Stokely Carmichael in his Cuban sojourn. Proclaimed Carmichael from Havana, "When I return to America, I shall rally support for our Arab brothers against the Nazi-like Jews".

In view of the recent developments in the Negro community throughout America, what should be the attitude of the Jew towards the black man? Since the conflict in our cities will unquestionably be a major problem in our country for years to come, it is fitting that we consider this question on such a solemn day as this. I am sure you know that there is only one answer to this question, an answer foreshadowed by the words of the prophet Amos which are inscribed on the first window in this Sanctuary, to your far left. Amos, speaking in the name of God, said to the Hebrews of his day who considered themselves superior to the cultures around them, "Are ye not as the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel". The Ethiopians were, of course, black men, and Amos was trying to teach his fellow Israelites, 2800 years ago, that, in the eyes of God, all men are of equal value. If the Negro is not merely a murderer, an arsonist, and a plunderer, what is he? The Jewish religious answer is that he is a child of God, like anyone else, with the potential for growth that is in all human beings. The answer of science, the anthropologists' answer, is identical. Studies done on white men, on yellow men, and on black men, under controlled and identical conditions, show that no race is superior to any other. Human beings respond according to their environment and according to the inherited conditions of their family background. To express it another way, the anthropologist would say, if white men had been brought to America from the tribal conditions that prevailed in Africa, and if they had been subjected to slavery and then



submerged in an alien culture, then, white men would act much as the Negroes are acting today.

Was the Negro always inclined towards violence? On the contrary. It is truly amazing how passive the Negro has been in view of the way white Americans have treated him for the last two centuries. I still remember the year 1946 when I was discharged from the army. With a few months between my discharge and my entry into Rabbinical school, I busied myself in the politics of my home state of Virginia, <sup>trying</sup> to elect, in those pioneer days, the first Negro to the Norfolk City Council. Willie was the middle aged lady, a Negress, who worked beside my father in his tailoring store. I said, "Willie, you have to go out and get as many votes for this Negro candidate as you can." Willie was afraid to do so. She informed me in no uncertain terms that she would not work in behalf of the Negro candidate. "You shouldn't be doing what you're doing, Mr. Herbert", she said; "everybody has his place". This was the Negro of 20 years ago. Passive. Fearful. Retreating.

If this is so, why all the violence today? The answer is that a few of the Negroes, and we must recognize that the vast majority of the Negroes eschew violence, a few of the Negroes, having suddenly learned that even the Negro has the right to aspirations and to resentment, a few of them have expressed their resentment as people unused to expressing resentment would express it. That is, they have acted as children would act, before children learned the mature ways of expressing themselves. They have acted in an infantile fashion, primitively - with violence. Sociologists and psychologically oriented professionals who have analyzed the city riots of the past few summers speak of the Negro riots in this way. Violence is not the basic way of the Negro. It is the way of <sup>any</sup> immature human being who feels trapped and knows no better way to express himself.

There is a story which comes out of Coconut Grove which makes the point clearly enough. "The Miami Herald" carried a story a few years ago of a group of Negroes who held up a grocery store. When two policemen arrived, two of the three Negroes hit the floor and held up their hands. A third Negro started firing his pistol. Although he was hit himself, the Negro kept firing blindly, and screaming, "Kill me white man, let me die!" Kill me white man, let me die. How tragic are the implications of this Negro's last acts and words. The cop to him was not a maintainer of order, a servant of the public. The cop was the symbol of the white man who kept his foot on the Negro's neck. In his frustration at being the man on the bottom, one of the three thieves was perfectly willing to die, rather than to go on in the life he led. The story is a symbol of despair, "Kill me white man, let me die". This may well have been the rallying cry of the snipers in the ghettos of Newark and Detroit, and you may recall the statistics that for every white man killed, there were five or more Negroes killed. This was



not just a war; it also had the aspect of a mass suicide. The resort to violence frequently contains a significant quality of self-hatred and the desire to harm oneself.

Unfortunately, the would-be suicide is an inverted murderer. He can take others with him. So we, the white men, suffer, because we have helped the Negro to hate himself. We have helped him to feel so desperate about his existence that he sees little value in its continuation.

Before we whites can begin to make amends for our sins of omission over the past years, we have to understand the scope of the problem. The solution to the problem, which is not a Negro problem, but an American problem, falls into three main categories, jobs, housing, and education. Many Negroes have so long been denied a good education, and have so long been denied access to good jobs, that they are trained by experience to ignore education, and they lack the stick-to-it-tiveness to hold on to a job. Recently, while serving on the Dade County Youth Commission, I visited the Juvenile Court and heard a truant officer charge a Negro mother with failing to see that her eight children attended school. The mother, who was trying to raise her family in the absence of a father, worked all day, when she could get a job, in the farm fields of South Dade. While she was working, the kids would skip school and wander around the neighborhood. How would they eat? They would look for empty soft drink bottles and sell them at the store. What would they eat? Anything they wanted to buy, like candy and chewing gum. The children were stunted physically and suffering from malnutrition. They hadn't attended school regularly for years. None of them, from age six to fifteen, could read or write. Eight children, ignorant, shiftless, without a parent at home all day. In time, they would be old enough to marry people like themselves and to raise children like themselves. Get a good picture of this family, and you can begin to understand the enormity of the problems in the ghetto.

Once you know the facts, once you understand the vast expanse of the problem in the black community, you have to match it with a vast resolve. Only a profound religious belief can make you accept the fact that these people, too, are created in the image of God, that these people, too, have the potential to grow and develop. But miracles are not achieved in a day. It took the Jews 2,000 years to get back to Israel. It took the prayers, and the efforts of hundreds of thousands of people over the centuries. Maybe it won't take centuries to help the Negro lift himself up to an approximate parity with the white American, but it will take decades, generations. We have to work forward not by miles, but by inches. Who has the dedication and the patience for such a task? There are a few, very few Negro leaders, like my friends Father Gibson and Rev. Graham, who have such patience. They need fellow believers and fellow workers. They will push upward from within the Negro community. We have to pull upward from



outside that community. In the task that necessarily falls upon the white man who has to atone for his sins of the past centuries against the Negro, we Jews have to recognize that ours is a special responsibility. The Prophet Amos said to the Israelites of 2800 years ago in the name of God, "You only have I known amongst the peoples of the world, therefore I must hold you doubly responsible for your deeds". Shall not he who has felt the lash of the taskmaster come to the aid of the oppressed? Shall not he who has tasted the bitter bread fed to the hated minority come to the aid of the afflicted minority of the present?

There is a huge range of activities in which you can busy yourselves, my fellow Jews. You can offer your legal services to the underprivileged as some of our members have done. You can offer your medical services to the poor, as some of our members do. You can go into the Negro community and serve as a tutor! Even now I have a call for a number of tutors for Negro children, and I will accept volunteers, if you will only phone me. If you are a home builder or property owner, you can see to it that Negroes are permitted to buy and rent property wherever they may choose. If you have such property, I'd like to have the address of the property. If you are an employer, you can call the Economic Opportunities Board, on which I happen to serve, and let us know that you will train a Negro, that you will bear with him patiently while he learns, and you will do your utmost to help him become an efficient wage earner. Please note that we don't need you to be just an employer of this man - we need you to understand his problems and to work with him through his failures. Jobs, housing, education, these are the main areas where help is needed. None of you should be aloof from this great task of the decades to come. It is not enough in this crisis to join an organization and to let it do the work, although that is important. What we need today are people who are willing to do the little, seemingly thankless tasks, that are essential to helping the Negro take those precious first steps without which the greater and more dramatic successes cannot be achieved.

At the end of the line, we project more U. N. representatives like Ralph Bunche. The goal is more men like Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, more opera stars like Leontyne Price, more organization leaders like Roy Wilkins, more U. S. Senators like Sen. Edward Brooks. You and I, as Jews, cannot stand idly by while the potential in the Negro is neglected, for we are the spiritual descendants of a certain Rabbi Hillel who taught, "IF I AM NOT FOR MYSELF, WHO WILL BE FOR ME ; BUT IF I AM FOR MYSELF ALONE, WHAT AM I ? AND IF NOT NOW, WHEN?"