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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday February 17, 2023 ~ Parsha: Mishpatim
Shabbat Shekalim

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Implicit Bias Is Worse Than You Think

Exactly 3 weeks ago today, authorities in Memphis Tennessee released the raw police video documenting the tragic encounter between Tyre Nichols and Memphis police officers.

Over the past several weeks, there has rightly been much discussion in our country about Tyre Nichols' death at the hands of the police. Why was he stopped by police that night? Why was he treated so brutally by the police? Why did the emergency service personnel do so little to help Mr. Nichols after he had been beaten so badly and tased repeatedly? How was it possible that police officers wearing body cameras could act in such a reckless manner and think they could get away with it? How many others had been similarly mistreated by these officers and the special anti-crime unit they belonged to? Where were officers and supervisors who might have intervened? What was the role of race and racism in this incident, or in countless others where police have killed unarmed black men?

These are serious questions, and both the Nichols family as well as every American deserves answers. But there is another question that has also received a great deal of discussion, a question that I want to address with you today. Much has been made of the fact that the five police officers indicted for Tyre Nichols' murder are African American, as are several of the EMS personnel who failed to provide even basic services to address his severe injuries. Several other police officers and sheriffs who have been suspended or relieved of command because of their role in this horrific incident are African American as well.

We know about racism in America. We understand how the legacy of racism, hatred and violence can lead to violent encounters between police and communities of color. We don't like that, we are revolted by it, but we can understand that. But the fact that this crime was committed by African American officers, abetted by the poor decision making of African American EMS workers, in a police department that is 58% black, and whose leadership is disproportionately black has led to tremendous soul searching within the African American community and beyond.

About 10 years ago, I learned about a study from the University of Colorado that should really challenge us. The point of this study was to examine unconscious attitudes toward race. People were asked to play a video game, where they would take the role of a police officer confronted by a series of images of white or black men either holding guns, or wallets or cell phones. The goal was to shoot at anyone with a gun, but to holster your weapon in the other cases. In control group after control group, people routinely shot at black men more often than white men, and were more likely to mistakenly shoot an unarmed black man than an unarmed white man.

Now let's ask ourselves honestly. Is anyone surprised by that?

Would you like to find out how you might respond? You can play the game (if you dare) at www.csun.edu/~dma/FPST/study.php

I learned about this study years ago from a column in the *New York Times* by Nicholas Kristof. He also took this test and wrote that he also shot armed black men more quickly than he shot armed white men, and holstered more quickly when confronted with unarmed whites than unarmed blacks. I am sure that it was difficult for him to publish that, yet to his great credit he did not shy away from this truth. This terrible yet all too real truth.

But even more significant was the conclusion of the lead scientist of this experiment. **He found no statistical differences between blacks or whites playing this game.** His conclusion was "there is a whole culture that promotes the

idea of aggressive black men...and therefore in our mind black men are associated with danger, whether we like it or not, whether we accept it or not, whether we admit it or not. There is a terrible amount of bias in our nation and we cannot help but absorb it.”

Kristof’s conclusion, and for the record the Torah’s conclusion are that these attitudes are real. They are part of who we are. So, we can waste time trying to figure out why this is. But that knowledge will not help us fix the problem. For the reality remains the same. But we need not surrender to our most base impulses. Whether or not hate is instinctual or learned, the **Torah demands that we not hate.**

And if we are not capable of that, The Torah demands that we not act on that hatred. That we are capable of.

We may never fully root out and destroy all bigotry and bias, but what we are capable of is acknowledging our imperfections, and resolving to do the hard work of understanding and confronting them. And a no holds barred confrontation with the national epidemic of racism, bigotry, and anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred is what our nation needs from its responsible citizens right now.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner