

Personal reflection, Barbara Kraft, Kehillat Yom Tov, Sept. 27, 2020

Believe it or not, I found myself reciting the confession of sin, the beautiful Al Chait prayer we're about to say, at the Miracle Theater in SE DC last year, shortly after a preview showing of the film *Just Mercy*. Those of you who saw it will recall that the film, about attorney Bryan Stevenson, focused on the plight of death row prisoners.

I had registered to attend the showing at the invitation of a Black Baptist leader in the Washington Interfaith Network. When the organizers saw on the registration form that I was a member of Temple Sinai, they called me. Other denominations would be represented in the panel discussion following the film, they said. It would be great to have a Jew on the panel.

That call came the night before the showing. I didn't ask who else was on the panel — it turned out Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, and other prominent clergy and activists were among the panelists.

I had read Stevenson's book, and discussed it with my public defender friends. And I consulted with my resident Judaism expert, Peter, about Jewish perspectives on mercy. We came up with a few ideas.

When the film was over, many in the audience were weeping or visibly moved. I headed up to the stage, where event organizers had quickly set up a semicircle of chairs, all of which were occupied by the time I got there -- except for the chair on the end, next to my Baptist minister friend.

The lights were bright, and I had to adjust my chair and posture to see and hear what the commenters were saying. As the interviewer went round the semicircle, it looked like I'd be the last to speak. Time was already short when it was time for the Baptist minister to speak. He was asked, what message would *you* take away from this film?

He turned to look at me as he responded: "I think *white people as a whole* need to think about taking responsibility. They have been in control, and they need to take responsibility."

I recall that we looked each other in the eye. I knew this person, had worked with him for several years, on several campaigns. I felt he knew me: he had given me a gift of two books, one a study of Kabbalah, one on the writings of Howard Thurman.

His words, *white people as a whole*, prompted me to share the AI Chait prayer. Our confession of sin uses the pronoun *we*. Each of us is part of a collective, a community, a nation. Aware of our individual shortcomings, we see them in others too. White privilege and racism are not individual personality traits, but phenomena that describe communities, societies. Our work, personally and collectively as a Jewish community, is to commit to reflection and transformation that will effect change, that will put us on the road to becoming affirmatively antiracist.