

Perpetuating Evil

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My beloved grandparents, of blessed memory, were integral to my upbringing. All resided in Houston, where I was raised, and three of them lived well into my adult years. All were born and reared in the South, as were four of my great-grandparents. None of my grandparents was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, but I also never heard any of them utter any racial epithets, glorify the Confederacy, or bemoan “the Lost Cause.” Only as a teenager, when I started asking questions, did I learn that two of my great-great grandfathers had been Confederate soldiers. At best, my grandparents seemed to be only vaguely aware of that troubling fact. They were in denial or simply preferred not to think about it over a century later. They never suggested that they were proud of that legacy—or, for that matter, that they were ashamed of it.

I am hardly alone in this congregation. With a history that dates to 1866 and current members whose ancestors were among the founders, plenty of people in our midst are descended from Confederates. A few years ago, Temple leaders were contacted by a man with the Sons of Confederate Veterans, who brought to our attention that the grave of a Confederate soldier buried in our cemetery was unmarked. The active Temple member who is a descendent of this Confederate, the then-President of the congregation, and I agreed that the grave should be marked—but by us, and not in a way that glorifies the Confederacy.

The State of Arkansas, by contrast, does honor the Confederacy, abundantly. The Capitol grounds are littered with monuments to Confederates. Yes, that lawn also includes a monument to the Little Rock Nine, who are worthy of honor, but that’s a testament to a moment when segregation was overcome. There is no memorial to the countless lives lost to slavery’s brutality, to lynching, or to any other racist violence, on our Capitol grounds. Our state flag includes a star that explicitly represents the Confederacy. Our General Assembly adopted the Historical Monument Protection Act of 2021, which prohibits removing a monument from its location on any public property—even public property that belongs to a city or county, rather than the state itself—absent a waiver from the Arkansas History Commission. Such waivers are not forthcoming.

In 2020, before that so-called Historical Monument Protection Act was adopted, Mayor Frank Scott announced: “The City of Little Rock removed the Memorial to Company A, Capital Guards statue from the grounds of MacArthur Park. The Capital Guards were a militia unit from Pulaski County that formed a

company in 1861 to fight for the Confederacy when the Civil War began.” Mayor Scott explained, though, that the statue was not **really** a memorial to history or even to those soldiers. It was erected a half-century after the Civil War, at what the mayor described as “a period of rampant segregation, inequality, and oppressive Jim Crow laws.”ⁱ

Turning to this week’s Torah portion, Rabbi Ariel Naveh, writing in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, encourages us to ask whether we ought to demolish Confederate monuments, just as the Israelites were commanded to wipe out idolatrous altars when they conquered the Land of Israel. As the Israelites prepare to cross the Jordan River, Moses instructs them: “You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshipped their gods... Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site”ⁱⁱ

The commandment seems awfully harsh, even unforgivably disrespectful to other people’s faith. However, as Rabbi Naveh explains, “The purpose of the destruction... is to establish the land as the sacred and true birthright of the Israelites, but it is also to establish the necessary rites of worship and practice in order for that birthright to be continued. Worshiping idols, statues, and altars like the peoples who inhabited the land prior to the Israelites’ arrival would be anathema; a new precedent must be established... [F]or that precedent to hold, all remnants of the previous means of worship must be rooted out, desecrated, and fully destroyed.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In our own country, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the United States occupied the defeated South and imposed a new racial order on the former Confederacy. Reconstruction, though, was short-lived. Soon, new forms of enslavement, peonage and convict leasing, took hold. Jim Crow and lynching reinforced a racial hierarchy that persists even today, nearly sixty years after civil rights became the law of the land.

Unlike Moses’s band of freed slaves—commanded to destroy the graven images they found in their new land, lest it lead them, too, into idolatry—Americans built and venerated monuments to the enslavers and to the enslavement that Union blood was copiously spilt to defeat. In 1913, Julian Carr, a benefactor of “Silent Sam,” a Confederate monument erected on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, acclaimed the statue as a testament to those who had given their lives for “the welfare of the Anglo Saxon race.”^{iv} The statue both celebrated and fomented racist violence. At the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville and at the Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, Confederate and Nazi insignia were flown side-by-side with American flags, tying racism to

antisemitism and suggesting that symbols of white supremacy and genocide are patriotic. They are not. Instead, they perpetuate the evil racism of the Confederacy and the genocidal antisemitism of the Nazis.

Deuteronomy's words are difficult to read. We do not celebrate the destruction of other people's holy sites. Nonetheless, Moses had it right: Establishing a just society, as the Holy One commands, requires rooting out the symbols of evil. Statues erected to justify white supremacy and the continued subjugation of Black Americans ought to have no place in twenty-first century America. As Rabbi Naveh concludes, "We must destroy and annihilate not just the statues of old, but also the despicable mindset they represent. Only then will we as a society hopefully warrant the everlasting name promised to us in generations past."^v

One Jewish Arkansan recorded as a "Confederate hero" was named Max Frauenthal, a name that will cause David Bauman's ears to perk up, because Frauenthal was David's grandmother's maiden name. David is not descended from Max, but from his brother Jacob. For many of us, Confederates and even enslavers are in our past. Sometimes, as when those of us with Jewish ancestors celebrate our Jewish heritage, we proudly preserve their legacy. At other times, we must forcefully reject even our own ancestors' actions. My ancestors who enslaved other human beings and fought for the right to continue doing so were in violation of Torah. We better fulfill our obligations all the generations of our Jewish people by rejecting their racism and by reaffirming the values we have received despite them, *l'dor vador*, from generation to generation.

Amen.

ⁱ [City of Little Rock removes confederate monument from MacArthur Park | KARK.](#)

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 12:2-3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Ariel Naveh, "How Do Our Monuments Help or Hurt our Memories of the Past?" *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 295.

^{iv} Naveh, p. 296.

^v Naveh, p. 297.