

Right Here in Arkansas: The Idolatrous Legacy of Lynching

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The most haunting memorial to injustice in Arkansas is not in Arkansas but in Montgomery, Alabama. At the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, better known as “the lynching memorial,” the Equal Justice Initiative has documented four hundred ninety-three racist terror lynchings in Arkansas among over four thousand nationwide. Each of the more than eight hundred steel monuments in the memorial marks a county in which at last one lynching occurred. More than fifty of them name counties in Arkansas, including Pulaski County.

On June 13, 2021, I attended the dedication of a memorial at Little Rock’s Haven of Rest Cemetery, which the Equal Justice Initiative describes as “the largest Black cemetery in...Arkansas.” It reads:

On May 4, 1927, a mob of armed white men captured a 22-year-old Black man named John Carter, hanged him from a telephone pole, and riddled his body with bullets in downtown Little Rock. Afterward, in a caravan of cars, the mob dragged Mr. Carter’s corpse through the streets of Little Rock. They drove past city hall and the police station before stopping at the intersection of 9th and Broadway, then the heart of the city’s African American community. There, the mob, now numbering in the thousands, ransacked neighboring Black businesses and churches, dragging out furniture and pulling off doors to serve as fuel for a bonfire they lit in the street. In an act meant to instill fear in the African American community, the mob set Mr. Carter’s mutilated body on fire as spectators watched. The mob had formed in response to rumors that a white woman and her daughter had been assaulted six miles west of downtown. Despite the absence of any evidence against Mr. Carter, the white mob terrorized the Black community, causing extensive damage. The next day, photos of Mr. Carter’s lynching were sold for fifteen cents apiece. Although the Governor and press criticized local law enforcement for not protecting Mr. Carter from the mob, no one was ever held accountable for their role in the lynching of John Carter. Racial bigotry and inequality were enforced through violence and lynchings during this time period, causing great suffering and harm.¹

In 1927, Temple B’nai Israel sat at the corner of Capitol and Broadway, four short blocks from the site of the mob violence and bonfire that included the incineration of Carter’s body. The *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* reports that “an

estimated 5,000 white people (including, according to reports, women carrying babies) rioted in the intersection and surrounding neighborhood.”ⁱⁱ

Unlike the neighbors of Nazi concentration camps, Rabbi Ira Sanders, of blessed memory, did not hide his eyes from the injustice and terror only blocks from the Temple—not far from his own home and the homes and businesses of Temple members. James Moses writes, “The lynching both horrified [Rabbi] Sanders and moved him to action. ‘When I saw that dreadful lynching,’ Sanders said understatedly, ‘I was convinced that I had come into a community that needed a lot of education.’ ...In response, he became a member of the...NAACP and also...the Arkansas council of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, [which b]y 1936...had nearly forty thousand southern signatories to a pledge ‘to create a new public opinion in the South which will not condone for any reason the acts of mobs or lynchers.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Torah impelled Rabbi Sanders to action.

Our Torah portion, *shof'tim*, is famous for the verse, *Tzedek Tzedek tirdof*, “Justice, justice shall you pursue,” a line that comes in the midst of a brief introduction to the obligation to establish courts and appoint judges to execute justice fairly and impartially.^{iv} Those verses are immediately followed by an injunction not to erect an idolatrous post next to God’s altar. The sages suggested that the post might be a tree, worshiped by pagans. Rabbi Tom Alpert writes, “The juxtaposition of these verses—those about justice and those about the idolatrous tree—led the Talmud to suggest that the appointment of an unworthy judge was akin to planting an idolatrous tree. That is to say, a miscarriage of justice is like the planting of a tree that encourages evil and idolatry.”^v Lynching was, among other things, a perversion of justice: White southerners appointed themselves judge, jury, and executioner. And their murderous miscarriage of justice brought still more evil.

The trees and other poles on which southern whites lynched their victims may be compared to idolatrous trees planted alongside the American system of justice. In words made famous by Billie Holliday, the poet Abel Meeropol wrote:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit from the poplar trees^{vi}

The “fruit,” though, did not consist only of lynching’s immediate victims. As the Equal Justice Initiative explains: “Lynching profoundly impacted race relations in this country and shaped the geographic, political, social, and economic

conditions of African Americans in ways that are still evident today. Terror lynchings fueled the mass migration of millions of Black people from the South into urban ghettos in the North and West throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Lynching created a fearful environment where racial subordination and segregation [were] maintained with limited resistance for decades. Most critically, lynching reinforced a legacy of racial inequality that has never been adequately addressed in America. The administration of criminal justice in particular is tangled with the history of lynching in profound and important ways that continue to contaminate the integrity and fairness of the justice system.”^{vii}

The fruit of those southern trees was and remains racism that is systemic—that is, ingrained into American life—pernicious, and lasting.

The United States is home to no fewer than sixteen major Holocaust museums among scores of smaller monuments to the *shoah*. Philosopher Susan Neiman observes, “It’s puzzling that an event that happened in Europe should assume such a prominent place in American...national symbolism—particularly when the United States did so little to save Jewish refugees before the Holocaust and so much to insure that former Nazis emigrated to the U.S. after it.” She goes on to suggest that perhaps “the focus on Auschwitz is a form of displacement for what we don’t want to know about our own national crimes.”^{viii}

Germany, too, is home to many Holocaust museums and memorials, as are most other European countries where the *shoah* was carried out. That took a while, but Neiman successfully documents the extent to which Germans endeavor to come to terms with their past and chart a better future.

By contrast, there is one major memorial to lynching’s victims in the United States, and it is nearly four hundred miles from downtown Little Rock. Americans increasingly make clear that they do not want to know about racial injustice in this country. Oklahoma has banned books, and I suspect that Arkansas will next year, on the basis of a law that prohibits public school teaching that might cause “any individual [to] feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of ...race.”^{ix} I don’t know about you, but just as I hope that Germans feel discomfort about a Holocaust carried out in their nation’s name, I, as a white southerner, am anguished by the terror wrought by white southerners before me.

Our Temple is now located miles from the corner of 9th and Broadway, and nearly a century has passed since John Carter was lynched. And yet, work remains to be done, in the tradition of Rabbi Sanders: to uproot the idolatrous tree of racist terror lynching by acknowledging that it took place right here in our midst, by

recognizing the horrific fruit borne by those southern trees, and by insisting that our sacred scripture requires an unending pursuit of justice.

Amen.

ⁱ [Historical Marker Dedicated in Little Rock, Arkansas \(eji.org\)](#).

ⁱⁱ [Carter, John \(Lynching of\) - Encyclopedia of Arkansas](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ James Moses, *Just and Righteous Causes: Rabbi Ira Sanders and the Fight for Racial and Social Justice in Arkansas, 1926-1963*, Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2018.

^{iv} Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

^v Rabbi Thomas M. Alpert, "Lynching: Justice and the Idolatrous Tree," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 300. Rabbi Alpert is referring to the Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 52a.

^{vi} Abel Meeropol, "Strange Fruit," 1937.

^{vii} [Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror \(eji.org\)](#).

^{viii} Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

^{ix} [HB-1775-Guidance.pdf \(ossba.org\)](#).