

## Legacy

### *Shabbat Tol'dot 5783*

November 25, 2022

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Jerry Jacobson was one of the first people I met upon arrival in Little Rock as a candidate to become your rabbi in 2013. As I got into his car for a tour, Jerry asked, “Block, from Houston. Are you any kin to Gus Block?” I confirmed that Gus is my father, to which Jerry replied, “He dated my wife in college.”

Trudy’s and my families have more in common than being here together tonight and Trudy and Gus dating well over sixty years ago. Both families enjoy long histories as southern Reform Jews. Trudy’s ancestors in the Pfeifer family were founders of this congregation. So many generations in one family, serving as leaders of one congregation, throughout more than a century and a half, is truly remarkable. My ancestors include a founder of the United States’ first Reform Jewish entity, the Reformed Society of Israelites, established in Charleston, South Carolina in 1823. Robert and Daniel are eighth generation Reform Jews.

Both families may be proud of these legacies, which represent extraordinary fidelity to Judaism and to the principles of Reform Judaism.

But there is more to our legacies. According to the 1860 Louisiana Slave Census, my great-great-great grandmother, Magdalena Seeleman, enslaved another woman. Philip Pfeifer’s 1897 obituary in the *Daily Arkansas Gazette* quotes the rabbi’s eulogy, praising him as “a Southern soldier, fighting bravely for the cause of his adopted section.”<sup>i</sup> The same might have been said of my great-great grandfathers.

Many of our neighbors have very different ancestral legacies. Descendants of the people my ancestors enslaved have much greater difficulty tracing their genealogy than I do. Still, Black Americans know where they came from, and it is central to their stories today.

Earlier this month, I attended a deeply moving event. It was a Race and Faith Summit convened by the Little Rock Congregations Study, a project of Professor Rebecca Glazier and the University of Arkansas-Little Rock. Surveying a diverse array of local congregations, Professor Glazier and her students learned that race was among issues that religious people identified as problems facing our city. Education and crime were also at the top of the list. However, when investigators asked what issue congregants would like their houses of worship to address, race rose decisively to the top. The summit was an opportunity for Professor Glazier to share the study’s findings and for clergy to hear from diverse

colleagues who are addressing race head-on with the goal of building a better Central Arkansas.

But first, after an invocation, we had lunch, with intentional conversation around each table. Since I had been invited to offer the benediction, I was seated near the front, at a table with three other men who were also on the program—two Black, one white. The white preacher remarked that he had read a study indicating that educational attainment is equal for Black and white children, provided those children are living with both of their biological parents. As I wrote after the event to Rev. Dr. George Parks, Jr., one of the Black ministers present, I heard my white colleague’s claim to be, “If Black people would only get married and stay married, and of course in opposite-sex marriages, educational inequality would be solved.”

Rev. Parks patiently explained the devastating impact of slavery’s legacy. We cannot separate questions about Black families and educational attainment from the logical consequences of four centuries of slavery, peonage, convict leasing, Jim Crow, lynching, mass incarceration, and racist systems that continue to place Black Americans at a disadvantage that is more complicated to unravel than simply telling people to get married and stay married.

This month, Arkansas saw a textbook example of what the term “systemic racism” means. Our state’s university in Fayetteville had been searching for a new chancellor. The interim chancellor, Charles F. Robinson, was a candidate. He is Black and a scholar of Southern history and race relations. Robinson’s candidacy enjoyed the support of Fayetteville students and faculty and of a variety of leaders statewide, including billionaire business owners. However, the University of Arkansas System President and the Walton family supported Daniel Reed, a white candidate currently at the University of Utah. Preferring another candidate is not necessarily racist, of course. However, the President and the Walton family employed what bias scholar Jessica Nordell has described as an age-old tactic.<sup>ii</sup> They redefined the characteristics needed of the Fayetteville chancellor mid-search, insisting that, above all, the university needed its leader to have the skills of a high-tech CEO. That is to say: They created a **system** that would disfavor the Black candidate. **That** is systemic racism.

The end of this University of Arkansas story is happy. After the Trustees seemed evenly divided for weeks, the Board Chair called a public vote. Robinson was elected chancellor. Unanimously.

This week, we read *Parashat Tol’dot*. As it begins, we learn that that Isaac and Rebekah will have a complicated legacy. Their twins fight even in the womb; then, Rebekah and Isaac make matters worse by playing favorites. When Isaac

prepares to bless Esau, the elder and his favorite, Rebekah comes up with a plan: She will help Jacob trick Isaac into blessing her favorite instead of his older brother.

Each of us who call ourselves Jacob's descendants, Children of Israel, celebrate legacies inherited from an ancestor who stole that blessing, our blessing, from his brother. Similarly, those of us who are white, and particularly those of us whose ancestors supported the institution of slavery, enjoy wealth and privileges stolen from the Black people our ancestors enslaved, directly or indirectly.

Nobody has an uncomplicated heritage. Each of us, no matter how lovingly devoted to our parents, can identify the characteristics we do not want to transmit to the next generation. We aren't always successful. Nevertheless, I wrote for a national Jewish publication a year ago, this congregation has improved its legacy: "Founded in 1866 on the heels of the Civil War, B'nai Israel counts Confederate veterans among its earliest leaders, men who had risked their lives to maintain chattel enslavement of Black Americans. But the synagogue's subsequent history shows how a commitment to justice can emerge even in places where racism and inequity might have initially been baked into its DNA."<sup>iii</sup> The Pfeifer family not only includes Confederate soldiers, but also, more recently, members of the Women's Emergency Committee.

In the least well-known section of this week's Torah portion, Isaac struggles with his father's legacy. He attempts to reopen wells that Abraham had dug, but which the Philistines had stopped. Twice Isaac digs anew, and twice, as with his father's well, the locals fight with him over the water. Finally, when he digs a third well, nobody quarrels, and everyone has water. A medieval commentator, Nachmanides, teaches that the first two wells stand for the first and second Jerusalem Temples, each of them destroyed. The third, though, stands for another Temple yet to come,<sup>iv</sup> a messianic redemption, a world of perfect peace.

We do not live in a perfect world. We do not even live in a nation freed of its legacy of slavery. Still, we celebrate the beautiful parts of the legacy we have inherited, even as we keep digging, struggling with the aspects of our inheritance that have brought pain and suffering. We work, and we pray, for the day when our legacy will be justice that rolls down like water from Isaac's third well.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> "Buried 'Neath Flowers: Funeral of the Late Philip Pfeifer; Services at Temple B'nai Israel, Rabbi Rubenstein Officiating—Interment at Jewish Cemetery," *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, July 29, 1897.

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<sup>ii</sup> Jessica Nordell, *The End of Bias: A Beginning*, Macmillan, 2021. Nordell describes this way that systemic racism works. She is writing prior to the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville chancellor selection, so she isn't referring to that process specifically.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Barry H. Block, "My Jewish ancestors owned slaves. That's why I'm a rabbi for racial justice," *JTA*, December 9, 2021.

<sup>iv</sup> Ramban to Genesis 26:20.