

Ross Z. Levy
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Advisor: Rabbi Ken Kanter

First Fruits: My American Story, Our Jewish Story

In 1990, the film adaptation of Alfred Uhry's play *Driving Miss Daisy* premiered in movie theaters across the world. *Driving Miss Daisy* tells the story of an unlikely friendship between an older Southern Jewish woman and her African-American chauffeur living in Atlanta from the late 1940's into the early 1970's. Set within the larger context of the American Civil Rights movement, it addresses the question of dual victimhood—the tragedy of an illiterate African American man in the South who lived the majority of his life seen as “less than” by society, and a well-to-do Southern Jewish woman who confronts her own prejudice and racism along with the harsh reality of anti-Semitism in America.

Growing up in Nashville, Tennessee, this story always carried a special resonance with my family. It speaks to the experience of many culturally integrated Southern Jews, but for us, there was a deeper connection with the characters of the story. Although the playwright Alfred Uhry based the character on his own grandmother, the name Daisy Werthan referred to a woman named Daisy Bernstein, whose grandchild, with the last name Werthan, became close friends with Uhry at sleepaway camp. Daisy Bernstein's sister was my great-grandmother, affectionately known to my family as “Granny Fanny”.

Like Daisy Werthan, Granny Fanny had a black chauffeur who could not read or write. And like Boolie Werthan in the story, both my grandfather and my father grew up with “help”, black women who served as housekeepers and caretakers for the family. For my family, this was simply part of the culture. It was a sign of their success and the full realization of the American dream—proof-positive of a *goldene medine* that gave us a home and the opportunity to live in safety and security. After wandering for so long, my family had made their way into a good land—a land flowing with freedom and opportunity.

The experience of wandering and suffering is what many envision when they look at the history of the Jewish people. It is deeply engrained in the cultural narrative that has bound us together as a people for centuries. At the heart of this narrative of wandering is the passage from Deuteronomy so beautifully chanted by Zoe just moments ago. The text describes a ritual to be performed when the ancient Israelites presented the first fruits of their harvest to the Temple priests. Upon offering their produce, they were to say: “My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers...and there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us...We cried to the Eternal...and God heard our plea and freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm...bringing us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. *So now I hereby bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Eternal One, have given me*” (Deut 26:3-10)

This passage encapsulates our narrative as a people. We repeat it every year at the Passover seder. It is the story that guides our identity as wanderers and strangers—the people who must always think of themselves as if they were slaves in Egypt. But for much of Jewish history, that was not part of their experience. They still lived in perceived exile, waiting expectantly to return to the prosperity in the Promised Land envisioned by our sacred text. That is, until we came to America.

For so many Jews in American history, and perhaps for many of us still, the United States has felt like the Promised Land our people dreamed of for so long. Its abundance and opportunity have allowed us to succeed in nearly all aspects of life. My own family’s story speaks to this ideal narrative. It is the story of a tailor who left his village in the German states in 1847 seeking opportunity, who married another German Jewish immigrant here in Cincinnati in 1850 before setting up shop in Nashville, and together, working their way to become respected members of their community. It’s the story of Granny Fanny and Daisy Werthan. It’s an American story, and it’s a Jewish story. But it is not the only side of the story we must tell.

To see the other side of our story as Jews in America, we should begin as our people often does, with our sacred texts. The great medieval commentator Rashi has a different understanding of the passage from this week's *parashah*. He interprets the Hebrew "*arami oved avi*" not as "my father was a wandering Aramean", but instead as "an Aramean oppressed my father". He explains that the "Aramean" mentioned here is actually Laban, the father of Rachel and Leah, who tricked his future son-in-law Jacob into providing years of unpaid labor. Specifically, Rashi points to Laban's pursuit of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel after their sudden departure from his camp. For Rashi, Laban's intent was initially to wipe out Jacob, and the whole nation of Israel, until God convinces him otherwise. Understood in this way, Laban, the Aramean who oppressed our ancestors, is just one in a long line of figures who sought to persecute the Jewish people, driving them into further exile and wandering.

While many disagree with Rashi's reading of the text, I think his comment offers an opportunity to expand and complicate our narrative as American Jews. It is easy to see how we are Jacob, suffering from oppression by those in power both here in the United States and in the countries from which we came. But what if we considered that we are also Laban—benefitting from the exploitation of an oppressed other? Laban, too, is our ancestor. If we can open ourselves to the notion that at different times and in different circumstances, we can be both oppressed and oppressors, victims and perpetrators, we can better serve as allies in the larger conversation surrounding systemic racism in this country.

When I tell my family's story, I often begin with US census records. In each document, I could clearly see one column, one criterion of classification that tells as much the story of my family as the street where they lived—the "race" column where they were designated as "white". The importance of this classification *must* come in to play whenever I consider my family's success in America, and the same is true for all in the Jewish community who had the benefit of lighter skin. Whether they knew it or not, the system and infrastructure that allowed them to live and do business and pray in relative security viewed them as white, and as such, they could benefit from those aspects of American life reserved for what so many viewed as the "superior" race.

Now let me be clear. My Nashvillian predecessors certainly faced all kinds of discrimination and hatred. They were barred from living in certain neighborhoods, from entering certain realms of commerce, from joining social clubs and all manner of community organizations purely based on their identity as Jews. For most white supremacists, European Jews would never be “white enough”. Both then and now, their ideologies demonize us, and unfortunately, our communities continue to suffer when that rhetoric turns to violence. My family knew this quite well. Their community also experienced vandalism and threats, and they too mourned the bombings and lynchings that often followed.

But in many ways, my family was “white enough”. They were white enough to never be seen as property in the eyes of the law, let alone as three fifths of a person. They were white enough to not experience voter suppression and overt criminalization of their being under Jim Crow—a system of laws that served as a reference point for the crafters of the Nuremberg laws in Nazi Germany. They were white enough to escape with their synagogues and institutions to the suburbs for fear of “inner city violence”. They were white enough to not suffer from redlining, or worry about polluted air and lead-infused water. They were white enough to have “help” and chauffeurs like in *Driving Miss Daisy*. They were white enough to use the n-word, and perhaps even believe in their own superiority over their black compatriots.

And today, I recognize that I am still “white enough”—white enough to not fear for my life when pulled over by the police, to not have to look over my shoulder when going for a jog, to feel safe in bed in my apartment at night. My family’s story might have taken place in the American South, but much of it is true for all light-skinned Jews in America. As a group, we have been considered “white enough”, and we must come to terms with that if we wish to work towards changing a system where being “white enough” has real, tangible benefits.

We must include this in our narrative. We must see that in many ways we have been Jacob, the wanderers who never felt quite at home. But we must also see the ways in which we have been Laban, who saw an opportunity to take advantage of another for his own benefit.

And we learn from our *parashah* this week that the act of telling our story must also involve action. It is not enough to simply offer our gratitude in words. We must present our first fruits as a sign of humility—an acknowledgment of the larger system that enabled our success. Here in the United States, we Jews who are “white enough” must do the same. We must offer the fruits of our success on the altar of justice and systemic change. It is one thing to probe our hearts, to guard against prejudice and racist bias. It is another thing to devote tangible resources to help remedy the unjust treatment of black and brown citizens in this country.

This means supporting initiatives promoting black businesses and entrepreneurship. It means considering with whom we do business, where we invest our resources, and how we treat those we work with and employ. It means using the powerful institutional framework we’ve built for ourselves to ensure that public resources are distributed to the areas that need it most. It means supporting criminal justice reform and showing up as allies and true partners for communities that continue to suffer in a country with so much plenty. We cannot simply be content with the notion that we are less racist than our predecessors. We *must* change a system that continues to operate on the foundation of white supremacy.

The first fruits that we present can be the fulfillment of our story—the culmination of our experience as wanderers who found our way into a good land, achieved prosperity, and finally recognize that it was not purely our own hard work that led to our success, but that we, consciously or unconsciously, benefitted from a system that afforded us more opportunity than another simply by the color of our skin. Only then will we live up to the vision of the prophet Isaiah, who dreams that the nations shall walk by our light (Isaiah 60:3). Only then can my family’s story be complete. And only then will the promise of this country truly be realized.

We cannot choose the story we were born into. I cannot reach back into time to teach my ancestors what I know now. I could cast them off, choosing to not place myself within their fold, condemning them for their complacency. Or I could choose to *learn* from my heritage, to appreciate it for the opportunities it has afforded me while also striving to better

understand what *allowed* for that success. Then it is up to me, it's up to us, how we write the next chapters of our story. May they be chapters filled with change, with compassion, and with justice.

Ken Yehi Ratzon

May it be God's will