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### **Struggling With the Negatives of the Past: The Need for Collective *T'shuva* in America**

Resting at the core of the Jewish High Holidays is the Hebrew word *t'shuva* or “repentance”. Coming from the root “*shuv*”, meaning “turn” or “return”, countless sermons, poems, and articles build upon its etymology, showing us the many different meanings we can glean from this central theme of the holiday season. As a community, our collective *t'shuva* is meant to bring healing and forgiveness as well as profound transformation. By turning to face our flaws and faults head on, we can best learn from them in the next chapter of our journeys. Moving forward *must* include a process of looking backward, confronting our past and using it as a means to grow.

On Yom Kippur afternoon, I tuned into a powerful [conversation](#) between LA-based Rabbi Sharon Brous and author and activist Bryan Stevenson. Their discussion focused on the possibility of healing and redemption for the United States, and the repentance (*t'shuva*) that such a process would require. What became clear to me is that the core of American *t'shuva* must include a head-on confrontation with American history—moving beyond national myths to a real, sober encounter with the trauma and legacy of slavery in the United States. We, as a nation, still struggle to confront the darker elements of our past, and in doing so, cast a looming shadow over our future.

When asked where he finds hope, Mr. Stevenson explained that it grew, in part, from a recent trip to Germany. There, he was struck by the *Stolpersteine* or “stumbling stones”, which list the names of families or individuals who became victims to Nazi persecution in the 1930's and 40's. He awed at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, located in the heart of the city near the Reichstag and the Brandenburg Gate. Mr. Stevenson voiced his admiration of the German process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or “struggling to work through the negatives of the past”, a term that only entered the German language after 1945. By observing the ways in which German society openly grapples with the demons of its past, Mr. Stevenson found hope that the same could be possible here in America—that we could begin to recognize the pain and suffering underlying our nation's story.

Together, we should embrace the redemptive possibilities offered by “struggling to work through the negatives of the past”. Rather than approaching our history with blind veneration, we should instead acknowledge and condemn moments of our history when the actions of our predecessors did not live up to the values we embrace as the core of American identity. At a time when Confederate general Robert E. Lee's birthday [continues to be celebrated alongside](#) that of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in parts of this country, we must recognize that we have failed at our process of *t'shuva*, our turning to the past in hopes of building a better future.

Many argue that such an approach to history constitutes some form of unpatriotic betrayal. What they fail to recognize is that the true sign of patriotism is not blind devotion to the powerful figures of the past, but rather the commitment to a better, more equal future for all Americans—regardless of heritage or skin color. In order to do so, we might learn from the Germans how to “struggle with the negatives of the past”—to use the horrors of past generations as an educational tool to foster empathy rather than to celebrate champions of hatred and oppression. They do not have statues of Hitler, Rommel, or Goebbels in their public spaces, but they do learn about them—what drove them to commit such cruelty and how we must work to prevent that from happening again.

True, the German commitment to confronting their history head on [has not fully quelled anti-Semitism in its society](#). Recent upticks in nationalist sentiment have brought with them a new surge in anti-Semitic rhetoric both in Germany and beyond. Unfortunately, modern science has yet to provide a foolproof vaccine for the virus of anti-Semitism. Moreover, no solution is perfect and hatred can still breed at a breathtaking pace in certain communities. But that should not prevent Americans in general, and American Jews in particular, from learning from the German model and confronting the violence and oppression that underpins the American experience. Only then, by turning towards our past with humility and compassion, can a better future be possible for us as a nation. Only then, can our process of *t’shuva* truly begin.