

I don't know about you, but in all the time I spent in school in my life, the history I learned was almost always about white people. That's why I like to talk about "telling the truth about American history" when people start ranting and raving about "Critical Race Theory." These rants are just bad-faith, coordinated political attacks meant to stop us from honestly looking at this nation's past and present. Frankly, when we tell only the story of white Americans, we're not telling the whole truth about this country.

That's all "Critical Race Theory" is, really. Telling the truth about American history. The whole truth.¹

These are the words of Rev. Jen Butler, the CEO of Faith in Public Life. But they could be mine as well, because every time someone mentions Critical Race Theory or CRT I am once again reminded of how our education system has failed so many by only teaching white American history - rather than just history.

In her short blog piece, Rev. Butler mentions Wall Street in New York and Black Wall Street in Tulsa. She reminds us that President Thomas Jefferson owned Sally Hemmings - she was not his mistress but his slave. Butler also draws attention to the role of the GI Bill after World War II in building the white middle class because of the lengths legislators went to in order to prevent those benefits being used by Black Americans.

This is our history, as Americans, as Michiganders, as individuals living in Kalamazoo County. It is unfair, and historically inaccurate, to believe that racism only existed during the Jim Crow

¹ <https://www.revjenbutler.com/post/critical-race-theory-or-as-i-like-to-call-it-telling-the-truth-about-american-history>

era and only in the South. Racism is alive and well right here, right now. It has been more than disheartening to hear that the Plainwell School Board needs security in order to attend meetings because of a belief by parents that CRT is being taught in the schools, and that it should not be. And that the Portage School Board has heard from many parents that they do not want their children being taught CRT. It is disheartening because CRT is not being taught in our local public schools, history is being taught in our local schools.

But what is Critical Race Theory? Where did it come from? The term was coined in 1989 during a workshop, spearheaded by UCLA Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw along with four other thought leaders, two white allies, and three organizers.² Crenshaw, in an interview with Vanity Fair, explained CRT as follows:

“Critical race theory is based on the premise that race is socially constructed, yet it is real through social constructions.” In other words, ask yourself, what is a “Black” neighborhood? Why do we call “the hood” the hood? Labels like these were strategically produced by American policy. Critical race theory says the idea of a Black person—who I am in this country—is a legal concept. “Our enslavability was a marker of our degradation,” ... “And our degradation was a marker of the fact that we could never be part of this country. Our Supreme Court said this”—in the Dred Scott v. Sandford ruling of 1857—“and it wasn’t a close decision.”³

Critical race theory pays attention to the ripple effects of such decisions. It asks us to scrutinize how and why society looks the way it does. “These are the kinds of questions the other side

² <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/07/how-critical-race-theory-mastermind-kimberle-crenshaw-is-weathering-the-culture-wars>

³ *ibid.*

*doesn't want us to ask because it wants us to be happy with the contemporary distribution of opportunity,"*⁴

Another perspective arises from Gloria Ladson-Billings, retired professor of education at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, who was interviewed about Critical Race Theory this summer. She is credited as one of the people to introduce CRT as a lens through which to analyze education policy. Her words have stuck with me:

*So critical race theory is a series of theoretical propositions that suggest that race and racism are normal, not aberrant, in American life. It relies on several tenets that include things like interest convergence - the notion that, well, you can get something done if you can convince the opposition that it's in their interest, too - things like counter-storytelling or narratives. And I know when people hear storytelling, they say, well, that's not empirical. But if you've ever been in a court of law, everybody's telling a story. They have the same set of facts. They tell the story differently.... I don't know that it does apply to the classroom. But from an educational policy standpoint, it applies to things like suspension rates, assignment to special education, testing and assessment, curricular access - you know, who gets into honors and AP, who doesn't.*⁵

These words have stuck with me because the fight about CRT is actually not about CRT at all. It is about fear of the unknown. Something that Crenshaw also stated in her conversation with Vanity Fair. She shared a story of her brother getting into a fight back when they were teenagers

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/22/1009182206/academic-who-brought-critical-race-theory-to-education-says-bills-are-misguided>

because some people took offense at his *dashiki*—a West African shirt made popular in America during the Black Power Movement.⁶ The dashiki was a symbol of Black pride, and those who attacked him did so because they saw Black pride, Black Power, as dangerous to their view of the world.

As a history major in college I chose to take Intro to East Asian Civ I and II rather than Intro to European Civ I and II. Instead of learning about Europe's early history, of which I knew a lot from high school, I learned about China and Japan. I learned another worldview that did not centralize white European understandings of our world. Everything from the maps we hang, to the books we read, to the languages we speak shape our worldview. If we are not exposed to more than one way of viewing our world, we are failing to give ourselves and our children a well-rounded education. An education that views the world through a multiplicity of lenses and understandings.

Yes, the history being taught today is different than the history many of us learned in school. That does not make the history propaganda. It means that finally we are coming to terms with the fact that white men are not the only people involved in our history, not the only people worthy of reading about. BI-POC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Americans have also shaped who America is today. Just as women and non-binary individuals have shaped who America is today. Social history is important, just as military history is important. It should not be surprising to learn that someone other than a straight, white, man had an impact on the world and yet all too often it is a surprise.

⁶ <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/07/how-critical-race-theory-mastermind-kimberle-crenshaw-is-weathering-the-culture-wars>

An example. I recently read a novel with the following dialogue between members of a family:

“Because of climate exchange and temperatures being higher, we could extend our high season all the way through Indigenous People’s Day.”

His grandma’s hot tea sprayed from her mouth like a garden hose. Everyone else just looked confused.

“It’s what they call Columbus Day now,” Zach said quietly. “You know, because of the whole killing the Natives and ransacking their villages thing.”⁷

The fact that we celebrated for generations the discovery of this land, land already occupied and rarely if ever spoke about the pain and suffering this discovery led to - that is heritage instead of history. Another example, that I share having been born and raised in Texas, is the importance of the story of the Alamo in Texas history. “Remember the Alamo!” we were taught. Yet, a new book was recently published called *Forget the Alamo: The Rise and Fall of an American Myth* - and is summarized as “Three noted Texan writers combine forces to tell the real story of the Alamo, dispelling the myths, exploring why they had their day for so long, and explaining why the ugly fight about its meaning is now coming to a head.”⁸ These writers acknowledge the role of media portrayals in the myth of the importance of the Alamo, even while historical documents prove this was not the case. Hearing an interview with one of the authors proved to me how deeply I held a belief in the importance of the Alamo, because it felt like a gut punch to be told it just was not that important. Because the heritage I was taught has been replaced by history.

⁷ *Last Summer at the Golden Hotel*, Elyssa Friedland, pg., 262.

⁸ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/623832/forget-the-alamo-by-bryan-burrough-chris-tomlinson-and-jason-stanford/>

But it is not just me who sees things this way. In an interview, Dr. Julian Maxwell Hayter, professor and historian at the University of Richmond, said the following:

I think in education or the teaching of history, we've moved away from heritage toward history. And many people don't know the difference, right? History is an attempt to reconstruct and interpret actual events and lived experiences. It follows rules of evidence and is peer-reviewed and debated. I think what a lot of Americans understand is heritage, which is a romanticized version of the past, usually devoid of the darker chapters. You know, these are the feel-good stories and, in some cases, stories that don't really deal with historical evidence, which isn't to say, by the way, that things don't happen in history. Of course, there are historical facts. The interpretation of those facts, however, is precisely what historians do. And I think a lot of people aren't necessarily familiar with that process.⁹

The shift from teaching heritage as history to the teaching of history has changed how we view our past, and for many that is uncomfortable or causes fear. It is this fear, this discomfort that we must each sit with and struggle with. Why are we uncomfortable? Who do we identify with in the past? How do we embrace our more diverse world? We must ask ourselves these questions, we must sit in our discomfort, and we must grow in our understanding.

Why choose to speak about how we teach and view history on Yom Kippur morning? I choose this morning to speak about history because history shapes our present. I also chose to speak this morning because today is a day to atone for our failures, both personal and communal. It is also because of the fearful rise of antisemitism around the world that I choose to speak this morning

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/05/1003533656/understanding-the-pushback-against-critical-race-theory-in-schools>

on the topic of history and heritage and how it shapes our everyday interactions. How some people choose to interpret history to wipe our people's suffering from it or to blame us for things beyond our control. But it affects us. Just as racism affects us because not all Jews are white, and not all Jews can easily pass for white - as I recognize I do. I can take off my necklace and kippa and blend in, just another white American. Many of our ancestors did just that, when given the chance. They chose to blend in, and yet we know they did not all succeed. Acknowledging when we have benefited from the teaching of heritage instead of history is not a failure. It is necessary that we take this opportunity to stand up and correct the facts. Because when heritage is taught, people of all kinds are hurt. If we consider the backlash against so many Americans after 9/11, we know how true this is. We have a responsibility to speak up when issues of hatred arise. When people twist solid theory to cause fear, and when the teaching of history is twisted into the teaching of heritage in order to raise up the few over the many. Teaching history is an imperative - if we do not teach history, and learn from our mistakes, we are putting lives at risk. Jewish lives, American lives, our neighbors of all colors and faiths and statuses lives.

Yom Kippur is our moment to reflect on who we have been and who we wish to be. To acknowledge our faults, our missteps, our sins and to pledge to do better. As Americans we have an investment in our country facing its history, and as Jews we know how history has been falsified to harm us. This is why we must speak up and speak out. Antisemitism, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, white supremacy - none of these must be allowed to grow stronger. We owe this to ourselves, to our children, to our neighbors. On this day of atonement, may we atone for our failures of understanding and education. May we atone for believing that America

had a golden age where all was perfect. May we atone for accepting our privilege without a second thought. May we atone, and may we do better in the coming year.

Vayomere Adonai: Salachti kidvarecha: And God responded: “I forgive, as you have asked.”¹⁰

PAUSE

I would like to continue our service, as we prepare for *vidui u'slchot*, the confession and forgiveness section of our service, with an interpretation of *Unetaneh Tokef*, our recitation of sins and failures, which was written by Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman and published in *Lilith* magazine in June of last year.

Each day we hazard our Black lives in the Court of the White World

We know our worth

Yet the white world is judge-self-appointed

We pass before you to be counted

12.5 million bodies stolen

1.8 million mercifully avoided your shores

Stolen shores, stolen land

10.7 million arrived unsafely

...times 401 years

...times infinite human indignities

...times $\frac{3}{5}$ of a human being

¹⁰ Mishkan HaNefesh: Yom Kippur, pg. 646.

We now number 47.8 million

In the morning it is written and by curfew it is sealed

Who shall die while jogging (#AhmaudArbery)

Who shall die while relaxing in the comfort of their home (#BothamJean
#AtatianaJefferson)

Who shall die while seeking help after a car crash (#JonathanFerrell #RenishaMcBride).

Who shall die while holding a cellphone (#StephonClark).

Who shall die while decorating for a party (#ClaudeReese).

Who shall die while leaving a party (#JordanEdwards #SeanBell)

Who shall die while enjoying music (#JordanDavis).

Who shall die while selling music...trying to make a way outta no way (#AltonSterling).

Who shall die while sleeping (#AiyanaJones)

Who shall die while worshipping the Lord (#Charleston9).

Who shall die for a traffic violation (#SandraBland).

Who shall die while coming from the store (#MikeBrown and #TrayvonMartin).

Who shall die while playing cops and robbers (#TamirRice).

Who shall die while lawfully carrying a weapon (#PhilandoCastile, #FreddieGray).

Who shall die while on the shoulder of the road with car problems (#CoreyJones
#TerrenceCrutcher).

Who shall die in the first hours of the new year (#OscarGrant)

Who shall die while shopping at Walmart (#JohnCrawford).

Who shall die while cashing a check in peace (#YvonneSmallwood).

Who shall die while reading a book in their own car (#KeithScott).

Who shall die while taking a walk with their stepfather (#CliffordGlover).

Who shall die while reaching for their wallet (#AmadouDiallo).

Who shall die while running away (#WalterScott).

Who shall die while asking a cop a question (#RandyEvans).

Who shall die while begging for their life, their breath (#EricGarner #GeorgeFloyd).

Who shall die by the effects of supremacy, greed, and apathy

...who by beast, indeed

“But repentance, prayer and charity temper judgment’s severe decree”

“But repentance, prayer and charity avert judgment’s severe decree?”

But *turning, connection* and *giving*, these return us to our Gd?

Whose repentance? Whose prayer? Whose charity?

Temper, please temper

Temper already! Temper...

For sins against God, the Day of Atonement brings forgiveness; for sins against one’s fellowman, the Day of Atonement brings no forgiveness till he has become reconciled with the fellowman he wronged. (Mishnah Yoma 8:9)

“The Day of Atonement brings no forgiveness

till he has become reconciled with the fellowman he wronged.”

When will you atone? How will you atone?

For you, like us, will be judged.

You, like us, will return to dust.¹¹

¹¹ <https://lilith.org/2020/06/unetaneh-tokef-for-black-lives/> ; <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/unetaneh-tokef-black-lives>