I went to high school in New York City, where I didn't even think about who I hung out with or where my friends came from. We were from all over, and we were of all ethnicities, classes, sensibilities. But when I arrived at college in the mid-'80's, I encountered an atmosphere of taking stock of one's privilege and perspective. This kind of thought pattern is easy to dismiss or parody, but I saw it as a way to see myself as an agent of moral change in a world of oppression. As I become more familiar with Jewish teaching, in particular the prophetic moral justice and the teshuvah we encounter today, I drew on this habit of self-reflection to ask how we bear witness and effect tikkun.

I found myself revisiting these thoughts often this year after the death of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, MO, and then after the deaths of Eric Garner on Staten Island, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, all unarmed, black and killed by police. I wanted to believe these were exceptional cases, and not symptoms of a systemic problem. It's easier to live this way. But the obligation to bear witness steered me otherwise. With a simple Google search, I learned through the Washington Post database of fatal police shootings that 24 unarmed black men were shot and killed by police between January and August - one every nine days. According to the Post, unarmed black men were seven times more likely than unarmed white men to die at the hands of police.

To bear witness from a personal perspective, I turned to the journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates, who writes for the Atlantic, the same journal that two hundred years ago employed Frederick Douglass. A number of us have probably read his book, Between the World and Me, an extended letter to his teenage son, in which he reflects on the precariousness of being black in America. Coates repeatedly reminds his teenage son that our society has a claim on his black body, and he doesn't mean this in the abstract. He means it literally – that over the movements, aspirations, freedom, and physical health of black people, our society strives to maintain absolute control.

He writes, "…you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way others can not know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful – the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find an excuse in your furtive movements. (p.71)"

As I read this book, it made me think of how much of what he writes about has been part of the Jewish experience, but also how much has not. There are some of us in this room, and if not us, perhaps our parents, grandparents or great grandparents, who experienced a time and place when Jews were the objects of states and societies that attempted to exert complete control over our bodies. Jews of color may feel this continue to be the case. Similarly, like so many Jewish families, Coates's family prized a sense of history and identity that went hand in hand with education, and some of the most electric passages in his book are those in which he recounts discovering a sense of history and self in the library at Howard University.

But contrary to the experience of most Jews who have been part of the American experience, Coates has seen first hand how no education, no job or position in society can insulate a person of color from racist violence. There are many examples he brings that would strike at the heart of each of us, but I related to this difference most personally as a

father. I can't imagine having to say to my sons what Coates says to his. I can't imagine having to say, "I can't protect you, not because of normally occurring accidents, but because the essential thing I gave you. The color of your skin, your history, your identity, may, with some measure of statistical probability, endanger your life when you come upon the wrong cop on the wrong night at the wrong time."

My question this Yom Kippur, whether we are white Jews or Jews of color, is the following: how do we bear witness, and how do we join in solidarity with people and communities of color seeking to make change? How do we draw on the lessons of teshuvah to change ourselves and help our society transform, doing what we can to extricate the sin and evil of racism from within?

I want to start with our Haftarah from this morning, from the Book of Isaiah, because more than any other passage in the Hebrew Bible, perhaps more than any other passage in our tradition, our Haftarah shows us how to take ownership of the oppression in our midst, and by doing so, take direct responsibility. The people of Isaiah's time lived, like all people, amid persistent poverty, crime and persecution. But they believed that their spiritual lives, their ritual lives, would save them and protect them.

We see this as a wrongheaded way of thinking, even hypocritical, and we see how Isaiah mocks them: "Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed? Because on your fast day you see to your business And oppress all your laborers! You "fast in strife and contention" and "strike with a wicked fist!"

But where exactly did they go wrong? Perhaps they sincerely believed in their way of life. Even Isaiah says that they believe they are a people who believe they are doing "tzedakah" and "mishpat," justice.

Rather, I see their problem as a failure to understand how responsible they are for one another.

Like us, the people of Isaiah's time close themselves off from the oppression around them under the illusion that they are not directly involved, that it effects others more than them. But, says Isaiah, we are responsible, and to be even tacitly complicit is to be actively oppressive. That's why he says that those of us who fast and go about our business while our neighbors suffer are the same people who "fast in strife and contention" and "strike with a wicked fist!" It may not appear that we are responsible, but we are.

So Isaiah proposes a revolution, replacing ritual as the path to holiness with compassion, which compels us to have a **direct** connection with those who suffer. Because if we look at responsibility as cause and effect, we can say, "I didn't cause that person's suffering, so it's not on me." But if our charge is to approach each person compassionately, there is no escaping the direct relationship with another.

In this vein, Isaiah continues: "This is the fast that I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, to untie the cords of the yoke/ to let the oppressed go free/ to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your

home; When you see the naked, to clothe him." Note the change here – from detachment and ignorance, being caught up in our rituals and our holiness, to direct engagement – if it was possible for the people in Isaiah's time, it is possible for us as well.

But ultimately, the impulse to change our ways – from insular detachment to direct connection, is not abstract, or philosophical – it's visceral.

As the final statement of his charge, Isaiah says, "u'mi'bsarcha lo titalam." This final phrase is translated as "do not turn away from your own kin." But I prefer the more literal rendering: "do not turn away from ***besarcha***, your own flesh." That final charge packs a double message: The first, from the traditional commentators, asserts that someone who is suffering **is** like your kin, your closest connection, and so even though you may say, "I'm not really responsible, I didn't cause this person's suffering," your obligation is still profound. But then the literal rendering – do not ignore your own flesh - conveys seemingly infinite responsibility, because that person who is suffering, who is oppressed, is really you, your flesh. Even if you feel shielded, tell yourself you're privileged, you're insulated, not at fault, it doesn't matter - the suffering of the so-called Other is our suffering.

I wonder what Coates would say about this passage. Perhaps he would see a kind of sad logic – a society that neglects the care of its body will turn against itself by punishing the bodies of those it deems other. But ultimately, we all suffer. In this way, Coates makes clear that white people are **not** shielded from the effects of racism. About white people, Coates says, "The fact is that despite their dreams, their lives are also not inviolable. When their own vulnerability becomes real – when the police decide that tactics intended for the ghetto should enjoy wider usage, when their armed society shoots down their children, when nature sends hurricanes against their cities – they are shocked in a way that those of us who were born and bred to understand cause and effect can never be (107)."

Teshuvah, if we take it seriously, helps us marshal this sense of our direct responsibility and translate it into action. In my study of teshuvah this year, I became intrigued by the practice of confession. It is a very powerful thing. According to Maimonides, it is the central act of teshuvah. Even when confession was accompanied the physical sacrifices that would seem to bring about expiation, the sacrifices were meaningless if not accompanied by a confession. After the Temple was destroyed, and we developed new means to make amends and pour our hearts out to God, our tradition held on to the confession.

Today, we have preserved the confessions as part of our liturgy. And as we go through them, most of us have an internal voice that says, "I didn't do that – why should I say this stupid prayer?" All the answers I've heard add up to an ethic of indirect responsibility. We personally haven't done them, but perhaps someone in the community has, and so we all own it. Perhaps no one in the community has, but perhaps some member of the Jewish people has. And even if no Jew committed such a sin (which is impossible to imagine), these sins exist, and so by confessing them, we remind ourselves

of our collective responsibility to address them, even if it is indirect. I've said versions of this dozens of times.

But now I see it differently. Perhaps we say these confessions, for things we think we didn't do, so as to transform our comfortable sense of indirect responsibility into direct responsibility. It's not "we, sort of oppressed, because really it was someone I don't really know who oppressed." If someone in my community, among my people, in my society or even among humanity committed this act, then it is as if I committed this act.

Confession, then, is a reminder that, as Heschel said, in a free society, few are guilty, but all are responsible. It helps us remove the veil of illusion from indirect responsibility and guides us toward direct action. Heschel was among the first Jewish leaders to proclaim racism as a societal evil. More than 50 years after he lent his efforts to the civil rights movement, we pick up the unfinished work, in collaboration with communities of color, to own, atone for and pledge to transform the sin of racism.

I am not sure what steps to take. But here are some tentative ones. In November, CBI Café is hosting a discussion of Between the World and Me, in collaboration with local African American leaders. This is a conversation, but a solid first step. I suggest we support the work of Bend the Arc, which is forging alliances with groups to work on issues of racial and economic justice. I would like to see us find and form relationships with leaders of color – and they are here in our community – to specifically talk, strategize, and collaborate on common goals.   I would like to see us create a forum within our community through which we can learn from and celebrate the lives of Jews of color. These are only the steps that I have thought of, and I know that, with our collective wisdom, and the wisdom of communities who represent people of color, we can create powerful examples of transforming fear into hope.

The outline of this path is murky and unknown, but as Isaiah says, unquestionably sacred. On this subject, I am compelled to give Ta-Nehisi Coates the last word to his son:

"The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one's eyes and forgetting the work of one's hands. To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown. It is still too difficult for most Americans to do this. But that is your work. It must be, if only to preserve the sanctity of your mind. (**p.99)**

I would add that this is our work as well, to make our community a sacred community.