

Justice & Righteousness Over Celebration (Amos 5:24)

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Shabbat Shalom. 1841, Greenville, Pitt, North Carolina. Ed Hill, my great, great, great grandfather was born into slavery. Gruesome, brutal, racist, chattel slavery. The institution in which this country was founded upon, and through which it thrived economically throughout history. When he was 22 or 23 years old, Ed Hill joined the 14th Regiment of the United States Colored Heavy Artillery, one of a number of all-Black military units fighting for the Union during the Civil War. The details of his story are still unclear to me: How did he escape? Or was he somehow set free? How did he decide to join the military? What did he experience in battle? All these questions and more remain, and it's very possible I will never fully know the answers to them. The same goes for other pieces of my family history, not fully understanding how they endured the collapse of Reconstruction or the rise and stinging power of Jim Crow. But one piece of my family history seems clear: that for Ed Hill, born two decades before the Civil War, fighting for the Union only became possible through an intense commitment to justice, freedom, and liberation, for himself, for his family, and for others.

And he wasn't alone. Nearly 200,000 Black men served in the Union military during the Civil War, nearly a fifth of them dying while fighting for their freedom. Thousands of Black women, kept from serving directly in the Army, served as nurses, spies, and scouts, including Susie King Taylor who I spoke of two weeks ago.¹ They fought and toiled, striving for their own liberation and the freedom of their fellow Black folks continuously enslaved throughout the war, until June 19, 1865, the day we are commemorating tonight. On that fateful day, all Black people, finally, knew that the Civil War was over and that they were indeed free, just the way God intended from the beginning of time. Two and a half years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, and months after General Lee surrendered to General Grant, word spread that the blood bath was over, and that freedom was on its way for the Black people of Texas.

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war>

On that day, June 19, 1865, General Gordon Granger read the following proclamation in Galveston, Texas:

“The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.”²

² <https://www.archives.gov/news/articles/juneteenth-original-document>

Throughout Galveston and the surrounding towns, there were celebrations and parties, tears and shouts of joy, an embodiment, a true understanding and feeling of the words of that old Negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty we are free at last.” And yet, many challenges remained. As the language of the end of the proclamation reveals, Black people were encouraged to just stay right where they were? The people who called themselves masters, using physical force to control Black people for years, were just going to start paying them wages? And the racist language as well, assuming that Black people would display “idleness” and that the country, these now, finally, again, United States, wouldn’t support them after oppressing them for hundreds of years. So although there was excitement and joy throughout the city and state on that very first Juneteenth, there was worry and anxiety and fear about what would come next for these newly freed people.

And, there was immediate backlash. In her book *On Juneteenth*, the historian Annette Gordon Reid exposes the raw, racist feelings that exploded on that day and the following days:

“Whites in Texas were incensed by what had transpired...In one town, dozens of newly freed enslaved people were whipped for celebrating. All over the South, Whites unleashed a torrent of violence against the freed men and women...that lasted for years.”³

For those of us familiar with the history of this country, we are perhaps not surprised to hear of this vitriolic backlash. It is a pattern, seemingly baked into the contours of our society.

³ Annette Gordon-Reed, *On Juneteenth*, Pg. 125.

After hundreds of years of enslavement in this place, Black people are finally freed following the Civil War; violence erupts. During Reconstruction, institutions are created to support the thriving of Black people who were formerly enslaved; opportunity expands, Black people are elected to Congress, progress is made; lynchings spread throughout the country and “separate but equal” becomes the law of the land. Wealth begins to accumulate in some Black areas of cities across the country; race massacres destroy them all. The Civil Rights Movement gains traction; the Ku Klux Klan revives itself. First Black President of the United States; the Tea Party movement and Trumpism. And just in the last few years, proliferation of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, fair critiques of police departments, and Black women in important roles in our national life; the current administration in Washington decimates any and all momentum. Again and again and again, progress is made, just like on that gorgeous day, June 19, 1865; and yet, just like on that day as well, backlash ensues.

And that backlash, especially in this moment, makes clear that we cannot only celebrate the progress made, but that we must also use these moments of celebration and joy to recommit ourselves to the work of justice, freedom, liberation, and peace. This alignment, ensuring our celebrations do not immunize us, distract us from the continuing work necessary to build the world as it should be, this moral and ethical alignment was a central theme of the Hebrew Prophets of our tradition. You see, the Hebrew Prophets were immensely concerned with the people of Israel living in holiness, living out the words of our Torah. And that included the moral ways of living in the world - feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, creating a better society and world, not only practicing the rituals and commemorating holidays. And yet, as seen throughout many of the Prophetic texts, the people fail in their endeavors. They show up, ready to fast on Yom Kippur while ignoring the hungry in their midst. They mark Passover, our holiday remembering our enslavement in Egypt, and yet fail to welcome the stranger into their community.

For the Hebrew Prophets, this is hypocrisy in action. Attempting to fulfill the ritual, celebrate the holiday, but not live out the purpose, the meaning of those holidays on an everyday basis. It is not as though the Prophets shunned ritual, prayer, commemoration, or celebration outright. But they sought, as the mouthpieces of God, to remind the people that those things should only happen in collaboration with the hard work of living out the values of these celebrations each and every day.

“I loathe, I spurn your festivals...” the Prophet Amos cries out to the people, embodying the voice of God.

“I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.”

“If you offer Me” (meaning God) burnt offerings, or your grain offerings, I will not accept them; I will pay no heed to your gifts of choice sacrifices.”

“Spare Me the sound of your hymns,
And let Me not hear the music of your instruments.”

“But...” (the Prophet Amos insists) let justice well up like water,
And righteousness like an unfailing, mighty stream.”⁴

⁴ Amos 5:21-24

For the Prophet Amos, again, embodying the word of God, these festivals, these assemblies, these offerings and sacrifices, these hymns and music mean nothing...unless the people bring justice and righteousness to the world.

So too for Juneteenth. It was only five years ago that President Biden declared Juneteenth an official federal holiday. And since that time, we've seen countless politicians, corporations, organizations, and all levels of government, local to national, find ways to commemorate the holiday of Juneteenth, the celebration of Juneteenth, without living out the values that Juneteenth represents: justice, freedom, liberation, and peace. The Prophet Amos would have some words for them; and we, in the modern day, should as well.

And yet, I can't help but think back to that very first Juneteenth. The pure joy and excitement and celebration that rang out. Free at last! And for decades of Juneteenth celebrations since then, families, like my ancestors, gathering together to tell stories of the past, stories of perseverance and determination; stories of moving from merely surviving to thriving. For these celebrations allow us to remember, to connect, to laugh, and to fortify ourselves for the next fight to come.

So yes, as we mark this Juneteenth as a CBE community, we will celebrate. We will sing and pray and reflect together, and remind ourselves of the work yet to be done. And following services tonight there is Shabbat dinner specifically for Black folks in our community and their loved ones, so we can take time to remember, connect, laugh, rest, and renew ourselves in community.

And with that celebration, comes the reminder, the imperative, the prophetic call for each and every one of us to continue our commitment to justice, to freedom, to liberation, and to peace. That was the commitment of my great, great, great grandfather, and it has been the commitment of so many others who have fought for freedom in this country. I pray that on this Juneteenth, and every day following, that we each hear that prophetic call, ensuring that justice truly does well up like water, and righteousness like an unfailing, mighty stream. May that blessed, holy moment come swiftly and in our days. Shabbat Shalom.