

Let's start out this evening with a couple of questions: may I please see by show of hands how many of us here today had relatives — not just Jewish relatives but relatives of any background — who lived in Florida in 1920? Ok, and now a second show of hands: how many of us had particularly Jewish relatives who lived in Florida in 1920?

Just about as I expected, which is a good thing, because otherwise I might have had to improvise a brand-new sermon right on the spot!

So we have established that very, very few of us have Florida roots that go back as far as 100 years. It sounds like a reasonable assertion, then, that we bear would bear little or no personal responsibility for things that happened in Florida that long ago.

Further, it sounds like a reasonable assertion that our very interest in such things would only be indirect, or perhaps academic, like for those who might make their livings studying the geological history of Florida or its paleontology, its pre-Colombian history or the history of its agriculture and urbanization. But the family stories we tell of a hundred years ago or more are much more likely to be about Russia, Poland, Italy, Ireland, or Brooklyn than they are likely to be about Gainesville or Newberry or Alachua.

But are these reasonable assertions actually true? This is an important question for us at the beginning of Jewish year 5780. We are being challenged in the public sphere today to assess our responsibility for any number of societal ills that began long before we, ourselves, had anything to do with them: the destruction of Native American life, for example; slavery, Jim

Crow, educational and economic inequality, gender discrimination, mass incarceration. The list is almost comically long, as is the definition of the "we" who are being held to account: white people in general, white men, men in general, Jewish people, upper middle class and wealthy people, etc., etc. etc.

Now, the simple answer to these assessments of responsibility is almost always "no", as in "no, I bear no direct responsibility for that" — my actual ancestors did not steal land from native Americans, did not buy or sell slaves, did not pass or enforce Jim Crow laws, did not participate in lynchings, did not deny mortgages to people of color. Though, to be completely transparent, my mother's Uncle Danny, may he rest in peace, did

serve time back in the 70's in a government corruption scandal in the great metropolis of West Haven, Connecticut.

Not long ago, I, too, would have stopped right here at "no" — no direct responsibility for such past crimes or related social ills. I might have felt a general responsibility to redress these wrongs as part of my commitment to the Jewish value of *tikkun olam*, working to make the world a better place — but not out of a sense of direct connection or personal responsibility. However, I have been thoroughly schooled by several experiences this spring and summer to take a much deeper and broader view of the question of responsibility. I'll focus this morning on just one of these experiences, a day long tour and exploration of the events known as the Rosewood Massacre, which took place in

1923 in Levy County, Florida, our neighboring county to the west.

The story, in brief, goes like this:

In the early 20th century, Rosewood was one of many small hamlets in Levy County and western Alachua County whose residents were predominantly African American. Some of these people were landowning farmers, descendants of people who had been enslaved on Haile Plantation or the Dudley Farm Plantation or the Jones Plantation that later lent its name to the area known as Jonesville, where my own neighborhood of Town of Tioga is located. Other African American residents of Rosewood were workers along the railroad that ran from Fernandina Beach to Cedar Key; or they were Gulf of Mexico watermen who had settled their families inland away from hurricanes and coastal storms, or they were workers in the

phosphate mines that dotted the area, or in the tung oil and turpentine producing forests of the region.

On December 30 or 31, 1922, a married white woman from nearby Sumner, Florida was badly beaten by someone who was almost certainly the white man with whom she was having a not-so-secret adulterous affair. But, after the fashion of the times, she instead accused a black man of the crime. In the early hours of January 1, 1923, a white mob attacked Rosewood, immediately killing five or six people, torching most of the village, and driving men, women, and children into hiding in the dense oak hammock forest of the area. It is unknown to this day how many scattered into the woods and how many eventually emerged. Between the original attack, the white posses that hunted down survivors, and prolonged exposure during an unusually cold January, estimates

range as high as 150 killed. What is beyond question is that the Rosewood Massacre effectively terrorized the African American population from western Alachua County to the Gulf, unlawfully removed them from their land, and drove them to relocate to other parts of Florida and southern Georgia. This was an ethnic cleansing, pure and simple. Nobody was ever brought to justice, and the only official recognition of these events is a small historical marker near what was once Rosewood that wasn't placed until the year 2004, and which local residents have knocked down and shot full of holes numerous times since.

But none of my relatives were guilty of anything at Rosewood, nor any of yours. So what difference should it make to any of us? We weren't there for one thing, and for another, don't we all carry with us a legacy of suffering? — the pogroms of the 1870's, the

Holocaust of the 1940's, the Irish potato famine, the Troubles of Northern Ireland, the civil wars of Syria and Sudan? Why should the suffering of African Americans in 1923 in a region in which we here tonight simply were not, be of more than general concern for us?

The answer is this: we are responsible because we have benefited from Rosewood and events like it, benefits that accrued to us whenever we or our first forebears moved to Florida, and as we have made our lives and good fortunes here. We have, all of us, without consciousness or evil intent, but also without acknowledgement or recompense of any sort, built our comfortable lives on the backs of human beings who were enslaved, persecuted, beaten, burned, and lynched. And the



survivors and descendants of these victims are our neighbors, to whom our obliviousness is an ongoing sign of contempt.

Let me clarify by posing another question. What first brought you or your family to Florida? Was it the business climate of a state with weak labor unions and no personal income tax? But these attractions are a legacy of the big sugar industry around the Everglades that built itself using slave labor early on, and then brutal working conditions after slavery was abolished. Our own first Florida forebears did not commit these atrocities, but they, and we, have benefited from them.

Or was it the tourist economy that brought you or your family to Florida — the beaches, the springs, the trees, the mild winters? These attractions might be the gifts of a benevolent God, but it

was slave and exploited labor that tamed the forests, drained the swamps, and built the roads that later became I-10 and I-4 and even humble Newberry Road. None of our relatives ever supervised a chain gang chipping up rocks for the great highway, but we have all benefitted from human toil unjustly extracted.

Or was it the presence of a great, public research university that first brought you or your family to Florida? But wasn't it the Rosewood-initiated depopulation of an entire quadrant of the state that helped keep land prices down and minimized need for tax-supported infrastructure in counties immediately adjacent to Alachua County? And weren't these factors that aided and allowed for the development of the University of Florida?

My point, in short, is that because we have benefitted from injustice in Florida's past, we bear a measure of responsibility for it, even though we were not the perpetrators of the injustice. I know this is a hard thing to acknowledge, but I assure you, it is not just some politically correct fantasy of the present moment. It is as Jewish as Yom Kippur. Remember the prayer we just finished reciting together, our ancient Jewish acknowledgement of communal responsibility — for the ways we have wronged You openly or in secret; for the ways we have wronged You through cynicism and scorn; for the ways we have wronged You by hating without cause. The idea of this most traditional prayer is not that every single one of us committed every single one of the sins enumerated in the prayerbook. The idea is that every single one of us bears responsibility for the consequences of every sin committed by any of us. Because we are Jews, members of a

synagogue, neighbors, Floridians, Americans, then I bear responsibility for the consequences of your sins just as you bear responsibility for the consequences of mine. The spiritual health of a congregation or a community, even of a state or a nation, depends upon a kind of sum total of deeds that makes us, like it or not, indirectly but truly responsible for the deeds of others.

Then what to do about these ancient wrongs that continue even today to weigh down our communities? How do we atone? How do we accept our portion of the responsibility? Some voices call for reparation, which is a large and complicated topic, though not a topic I want to dwell on this evening, beyond saying this: reparations are an alternative that Jews should not simply dismiss out of hand, because the modern state of Israel would unlikely

have survived its infancy without massive reparation payments from post-war Germany.

Other voices call upon us to renounce what they call our white privilege, or our male privilege, or the unspoken privileges of relative wealth. But I believe this is the wrong approach, to suggest that anyone has to give up anything. I like being white, male, and affluent, and I'm not inclined to give any of those things up. But here's the thing: privilege is not a finite, zero sum commodity, though we often fall into the trap of thinking that it is. The way to atone for the dreadful crimes of the past, crimes for which we bear responsibility though we are not the actual perpetrators, the way to atone for the dreadful crimes of the past is not to strip people of privilege but to extend privilege to everyone. The things that I have enjoyed by virtue of being

white, male, and affluent should be the same things that are enjoyed by every single person, simply by virtue of being a human person: black, white, brown; gay, straight, trans-; rich, poor, middle class; fully abled or differently abled. I have been privileged to be considered innocent of wrongdoing without strong evidence to the contrary: that same privilege should extend to every black teenager no matter what they happen to be wearing at the moment. I have been privileged to consider the police to be my friends and my protectors, agents of my safety: so should every human person. I have been privileged to be free of harassment based on my appearance, my ethnicity, my sexual orientation: so should every trans-person, every Muslim in hijab, every Sikh wearing a turban, every woman wearing a halter top or high heels. I have been privileged to enjoy adequate and proper healthcare — at a price that makes my head spin, yes, but

at least it has been there for me, as it should be for every single human person.

All of these privileges are completely within the reach of the most prosperous nation in the history of the world, and would quickly spread worldwide given our consistent good example. Except for healthcare, none of them are even expensive; and not a single one of them need cost anyone their current privilege. When we can make white male affluent privilege the privilege of every human being, then we will have accomplished the truest reparation. We will have repaired the injustice upon which our current prosperity teeters unsteadily. We will enjoy a new and better prosperity; a spiritual and a material prosperity. We will all be immeasurably more wealthy , more blessed, and more worthy of blessing. Amen.