

## Rabbi's Message April 2021

Dear Friends,

On Monday, March 29, a rather large and powerful 38-year-old man was recorded on surveillance video kicking 65-year old Filipina immigrant, Vilma Kari, to the ground near Times Square in my city of New York, as she was on her way to church. He then continued to kick her a number of times in the head, eventually bringing the whole thing to a close with his battle cry shout: "You don't belong here!" To make matters even worse, standing inside the safety of the lobby of a luxury apartment building by which they were employed, just a few feet away from the attack, were three men watching the entire episode as they did nothing to help. In fact, the only action they did take was to distance themselves by closing the front door.

Fortunately, within a couple days, the attacker had been arrested, the three building employees suspended, and Ms. Kari released from the hospital. Still, though, there can be no denying that the episode was nothing short of horrific.

Anyone who's seen the video, it seems, has been overcome with the same reaction: "*This is not America. What has happened to our country?*" Unfortunately, even as this may seem a reasonable reaction to a reprehensible set of circumstances, and even if it *is* true that the emotional temperature of America has been rising higher and higher and higher over the past few years, were we to be perfectly honest with our American selves, we'd actually see that in some bone-chillingly unfortunate ways, this response reveals a longstanding and deep-seated disconnect, because the fact is, the attack of March 29 really *is* our country. Not that American ideals are racist, because surely they're not, but reality suggests that the Land of the Free doesn't always live up to the ideals we claim to hold so dear. Case in point: The Asian experience in America.

For those who are already well schooled in the history of Asian life in America, I hardly need to help you understand my angst over the way our nation has fallen short of our ideals in this arena over the past couple centuries. And for those like me who, until just recently, are lacking in awareness of the torrid American history of anti-Asian bigotry, I encourage you to spend some time learning about it. I don't pretend to be an expert, so I'm not the best person to ask for the most up-to-date scholarship on the subject, but even a simple perusal of the Asian American History Timeline, as compiled by the Center for Educational Telecommunications (<http://www.cetel.org/timeline.html>), will be enough to leave you gobsmacked if you've never been exposed to these historical details before.

Whether it's the:

- 1854 decision, *People v. Hall*, (<https://immigrationhistory.org/item/people-v-hall/>), which ruled that people of Chinese descent could not give testimony in court against white individuals;
- **1878** decision, *In re Ah Yup* (<http://smithsonianapa.org/now/this-month-in-history-in-re-ah-yup-rules-chinese-ineligible-for-naturalized-citizenship-on-april-29-1878/>), which ruled that people of Asian descent were ineligible for naturalized citizenship;
- **1889** decision, *Chae Chan Ping v. U.S.* (<https://immigrationtounitedstates.org/409-chaе-сhаn-ping-v-united-states.html>) that upheld the constitutionality of Chinese exclusion laws;
- 1922 Cable Act (<https://immigrationhistory.org/item/cable-act/>), which affirmed that any American female citizen married to "an alien ineligible to citizenship" (which was interpreted especially to refer to men of Asian descent) would forfeit her own citizenship;
- or President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's **1942** Executive Order 9066 (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5154#:~:text=Authorizes%20Japanese%20Relocation,Executive%20Order%209066%3A%20The%20President%20Authorizes%20Japanese%20Relocation,and%20resident%20aliens%20from%20Japan>), which authorized forced Japanese relocation – arguably the single worst episode of all within the entire history of American anti-Asian discrimination . . .

it can hardly be denied that our country has, time after time, fallen well short of our professed ideals when it comes to our treatment of the vast and diverse Asian community within our borders. And even though the examples of discrimination listed above have all been reversed in our codes of law, Asian Americans continue to suffer discrimination at an alarming rate. While federal statistics for 2020 have not yet been released, 2019 was already showing a dramatic increase in anti-Asian hate crimes. The fact that Covid-19 originated in China has only added fuel to the fire.

It's time for this to stop.

I don't pretend to have a simple solution, but I do know that having just spent the holiday of Passover expressing our gratitude to God for the freedoms we enjoy today, and that anticipating the pangs of sorrow we are about to feel on *Yom HaShoah* (April 8), we Jews understand what it's like to be the target of bigoted hatred, and we also know what it's like to be on the beneficiaries of divine redemption.

So, again, I don't pretend to have a simple solution, but I do know with every fiber of my experience that every human being is created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. And for that reason, every human being is entitled to be treated with the same basic humanity as every other human being.

The America in which we are living, one that has failed time after time to live up to its noble ideals, desperately needs our help. None of us can solve the centuries-long scourge of anti-Asian bigotry in America entirely on our own, but neither will the scourge be alleviated so long as we stay silent. So if we truly love America, as I certainly do, our only choice at this point is to speak up, do something, and work to build a bridge, no matter how small. Our national soul depends on it.

לֹא עֲלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמֵּר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה.

*Lo alecha ham'lachah ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin libateil mimenah.*

It is not your obligation to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it

— Pirkei Avot 2:16 |

L'Shalom,  
Rabbi Dubin