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Rosh Hashanah Sermon
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Common Ground

I love books about people and places. Every time I go somewhere, or even plan to go somewhere, I love to read about the people of the place—and the place. It can be non-fiction or fiction. Here are some recommendations: New York—The Great Bridge, by David McCullough. Washington, D.C.,— Personal History, by Katherine Graham. Napa Valley—The House of Mondavi, by Julia Flynn Siler. Paris—Is Paris Burning, by Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins. Japan—Shogun, by James Michener. Israel—Exodus by Leon Uris. Boston—Common Ground, by J. Anthony Lukas.

I love Boston. I have lived in Boston for almost all of the past 30 years, 60% of my life. When I arrived in Boston, alone, in 1988 to start my first job, I did two things *before* I started work—I explored the city and I read Common Ground, by J. Anthony Lukas. Especially for those of you who are new to Boston, I have lots of recommendations about things to do and places to go, but one thing I really, really recommend is reading Common Ground, by J. Anthony Lukas.

The book's subtitle is A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families. It is a nonfiction book, published in 1985, that examines race relations in Boston through the prism of desegregation busing. It received the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Common Ground traces the history of three families: The working-class African American Twymons, the working-class Irish McGoff's, and the middle-class Yankee Divers. It gives genealogical histories of each of the families, focusing on how the events they went through illuminated Boston history, before narrowing its focus to the racial tensions in the 1960's and 1970's.

Rachel Twymon is a struggling and devoted black mother of six. Alice McGoff is a young widow of Irish extraction, trying to raise seven children in the old part of Charlestown, right near Bunker Hill. Colin Diver worked in the Mayor's office and moved to the South End, then a poor and "dangerous" zone in the city. Behind these families is a portrait of major figures in Boston—the Mayor of Boston, the Editor of the Boston Globe, the Catholic Cardinal, and more. We get a fascinating survey of Boston, hearing about the city's power structure, the tribal ways of its ethnic neighborhoods, the character of its housing projects, and the spirit of its people.

The key event in this story is the response of the people of Boston to a judge's order that racial balance be introduced into Boston public schools by transporting students across district lines. Boston, like many cities, did not follow the Supreme Court desegregation ruling in 1954. There was lots of turmoil to this judge's order. *The New York Times Book Review* on [Common Ground](#) explains,

The Mayor and the Cardinal responded to the turmoil with a kind of listless ambivalence, as did most of the city's leadership, and so people of the affected communities were largely left to deal with matters themselves—caught up in events they could neither master nor fully understand. It was a time of crackling hostility and damage. Mr. Lukas' account reminds us that the cost of this kind of repair to a city's moral fabric can be tremendous; moreover, it is invariably borne by those who can afford it least. The human map of a city has very little to do with the lines cartographers draw across its surface.

A city is a thing of neighborhoods—'urban villages'....Issues like busing have a good deal to do with the nature and size of the universe one is contemplating. If one looks at racial inequality from the austere remove of the Federal Bench, one's eyes takes in the whole of the city, and from that vantage point the transfer of students from one place to another within that bounded space seems as fair a solution as can be imagined. But when one's eye takes in no more than the narrower precincts of a neighborhood like Charlestown, such a solution can be experienced almost like an assault on a walled village, an invasion....When you look at the rest of the world through such a lens, it scarcely makes better sense to bus strangers from Roxbury, on the other side of the city—to Charlestown, in

the name of Boston's purity—than to bus strangers in from Albuquerque, N.M., in the name of the nation's purity.

Mr. Lukas' account also reminds us that city streets can be mean. Imagine standing on the security of your own turf—as many of the people of Charlestown did and may of the rest of us would have—and yelling the most frightening obscenities at a 12-year-old black child who can scarcely breathe in that thick sea of wrath. Whether we view that potential for cruelty as lodged in the very tissues of humankind or as the residue of generations of resentment and disappointment, it rears like a harsh and foul presence in such moments as these.

I recently re-read this book review from 1985, 32 years ago, and with a chill that goes through my spine, I can't help but think of Charlottesville and how much work our nation still has to do.....(*long pause*)....I also can't help but think of the Torah reading from Genesis 21 on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, when Sarah, our mother, says to Avraham, our father, "Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." Just like Charlestown's mothers in the 1970's, our mother Sarah, view's Hagar's presence and the presence of her son, Ismael, as "an assault on a walled village, an invasion...."

Let me back-up a little and give a quick summary of what happens in this part of our Torah reading: At the age of ninety, previously barren Sarah miraculously gave birth to a son, who Abraham named Isaac. Isaac was circumcised when he was eight days old by his father Abraham. Sarah was overjoyed by the tremendous miracle. "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children," she exclaimed. Abraham made a huge feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. Sarah noticed Ishmael, Abraham's eldest son borne to him from her maidservant Hagar, now also Abraham's wife—playing. Sarah demanded from Abraham that he expel both Ishmael and Hagar from the household. God instructed Abraham to listen to Sarah's words, for "your progeny will be called [only] after Isaac." Nevertheless, God promised Abraham that Ishmael's descendants, too, will be made into a nation, for Ishmael, too, is Abraham's seed. Abraham expelled Hagar and Ishmael; they wandered in the desert and ran out of

water. Hagar put her son Ishmael under a bush, sat a distance away, and cried, thinking, “don’t let me see the child die.” God heard Ishmael’s cry and God told Hagar that God would make a great nation of Ishmael. God opened Hagar’s eyes, and God showed Hagar a well of water from which to give Ishmael to drink. God was with Ishmael as he grew up.

We are taught that we have multiple new years. Every day, we recall in our prayers, the exodus from Egypt, our national liberation event. According to Exodus 12, we mark Nissan, the month of Passover when we celebrate the Exodus, as the beginning of months, The New Year. On the other hand, the Torah does not begin with Exodus, the creation of the Jewish people. Instead, it begins with Genesis, the creation of the world and all human beings. And while we refer to Nissan, the month of Passover, as the “beginning of our months,” for our festival calendar, we say “Happy New Year” and count our years on Rosh Hashanah in the month of Tishrei, when we recall the birth of the word.

Why is it on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, that we read about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael and not something bigger or broader such as the first chapter of Genesis, the story of the creation of the world? One traditional answer is that we want to focus on God’s special relationship with our ancestors — Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. This answer does not satisfy me, because this reading is not just about God’s special relationship with Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac but also God’s special relationship with Hagar and Ishmael. After all, God heard Ishmael’s cry, God’s angel spoke to Hagar and promised a great nation would come from Ishmael, God opened Hagar’s eye’s and God was with Ishmael as he grew up.

I believe God’s message for us on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, is decidedly universal, not particular. In the first chapter of Genesis we are taught that all human beings are made in God’s image. But how does this teaching become real for us? By doing what the *New York Times Book Review* says J. Anthony Lukas did with his book, by shrinking the nature and size of the universe one is contemplating. Just as

Lukas gives us the Twymons, McGoff's, and Divers, Genesis gives us Sarah and Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael.

Just as God heard and saw not just Abraham and Sarah and Isaac but also Hagar and Ishmael, may we celebrate the birthday of the world and serve God by hearing and seeing each other, especially those who are other. And may we live our lives knowing that Boston and the world are "common ground" for us all.

לשנה טובה: תכתבו ותחתמו