

Congregation Beth El Social Justice Book Group Discussion ***Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates***

Kiddushin 40b

Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were reclining in the loft of the house of Nit'za in Lod, when this question was asked of them: Is study greater or is action greater? Rabbi Tarfon answered and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered and said: Study is greater. The Sages answered and said: Study is greater, as study leads to action.

Guiding Questions

1. Name an emotion that was evoked in you while reading this book.
2. Coates was inspired to write *Between the World and Me* after meeting with President Obama. What may have motivated him? The book takes its title from a line in a poem written by Richard Wright. What do you think is the reason Coates chose this title for the book? How is the title connected with the message conveyed it?
3. Fear is palpably described in the book's opening section and shapes much of Coates's sense of himself and the world. "When I was your age," Coates writes to his son, "the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid." Fear for his child hovers the book. Can you relate to his experience? Why or why not?
4. The book is written in the form of a letter from Coates to his 15-year-old son, Samori. Why do you think Coates chose to structure the book in this way? How did this format affect your reading?
5. One broad concept that Coates introduces is that of "the Dream" and "Dreamers." What do you understand these terms to mean? Why does Coates argue that he and other Black people are cut off from "the Dream"?
6. There are three clear instances in the book where Coates fears for his life: After witnessing a young man draw a gun in Baltimore, when he's pulled over by a cop in Prince George's County, and when a stranger threatens to have him arrested at a New York movie theater. What common threads underlie these encounters?

7. Books are of the highest importance to Coates. How does Coates's relationship with books contrast with his attitude toward the classroom? What can we learn about his experience in school?

8. Coates writes on page 71: "Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about his world is meant to be." What do you think he means?

9. What surprised you most about the book? What will you take with you after reading it?

10. Do you think *Between the World and Me* leaves us with hope for race relations in America? Why or why not? Do you think "hope" was what Coates was trying to convey to readers? If not, what are you left with at the end of the book?