

What Is Hateful To You, Do Not Do To Another, Part 4: PRIVILEGE

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On the 2nd day of my son Ezra's life, my husband and I got into a small argument. It was about our son's birth certificate. What would we put down for ethnicity?

Glenn was going to check the box that said "white." But I was strongly opposed. My baby's ethnicity was not "white."

Glenn was caught off guard by the intensity of my reaction. "What are you talking about?" he said, "Look at the kid! Look at us! We're white! He's white!"

I said "No! I am not "white." I'm Semitic. My people are from the Middle East. We are in America because even my ancestors who came from Europe were not really European, they were Jews. My ancestors weren't white, so I'm not white, I'm Semitic. White might be my skin color, but it's not my ethnicity."

Glenn on the other hand was not thrilled about the idea of writing in "Semitic" on his baby's birth certificate. He was thinking of the Nazis and the census records that they used to identify the Jews. He was not interested in making his brand new baby more vulnerable than he already was.

It was a very emotional and personal argument for both of us, fueled by a lack of sleep. The argument was not about how we saw ourselves, but rather about how others see us. We both knew who we are, but how do we determine for this little baby what his identity will be? What would it mean to publicly and officially identify him as a Jew? I pointed out to Glenn that since I was a rabbi, it probably wasn't going to be too hard for people to figure that out.

In retrospect, I realize now that this argument is one that can only take place when a person is operating out of a place of privilege. The privilege of being able to define one's own identity, and choose to be open about it, or to keep it hidden, revealing it only at one's own discretion.

Well, it's hard to argue with a woman who just gave birth to a 9 ½ pound behemoth of a baby. So I won. We checked off "other" on the birth certificate and wrote in "Semitic."

And in my opinion, "other" really is the most fitting of descriptions for Jews. For those of us who identify as being ethnically Jewish, we come in every color possible. In so many ways, we simply don't have a box to check that adequately describes who we are.

In America, Jews, as a group, are a people who walk in and out of privilege. And even within our community there are different levels of privilege. We too often make assumptions or judgements about who is on the inside and who is on the outside. Some people feel that they are at the center of our community, others experience themselves on the periphery. And our communal boundaries can also be semi-permeable, sometimes letting people in, sometimes shutting them out.

My entire life I feel like I have walked in and out of privilege.

Growing up in Orange County, I was seen as white, until people found out that I was Jewish, and then suddenly neighborhoods, organizations, clubs, even friendships, became off limits to me.

I'm a rabbi, so I enjoy a great deal of privilege in the Jewish community, but I'm also a female Reform rabbi, so sometimes I'm at the table helping make decisions, and then at other times I am told in the most offensive of ways that my presence is not welcomed.

And because I'm Ashkenazi and Sephardic, I often feel like I am neither rather than both, and can feel like an outsider wherever I am in the Jewish community.

Depending on where I am standing, and who I am standing with, I experience my sense of privilege as either being magnified or diminished. And I am well aware that even this is a luxury that many people do not have.

Back in 1995 when I was a rabbinic intern at Cong. Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, a synagogue that does outreach to the LGBTQ community, I had the honor of studying with Rabbi Yoel Kahn. He described to me two of the different ways that people can experience discrimination. He put it this way, saying, being Jewish is like being gay, and being a woman is like being a person of color.

To be Jewish is having to decide over and over, in different settings, and with different people, whether or not to out yourself, you have to determine whether or not it is safe to reveal who you are.

But women, like people of color, don't have the choice, because we wear our identities in an overt way, and as a result we face both conscious and unconscious bias on a daily basis. We don't have the luxury, or one might say, the privilege, of defining who we are because society does it for us.

For many of us, to talk about "privilege" is uncomfortable. We all hold close to our hearts our own experiences of injustice and the pain of being the "other." None of us wants to think that having what we have somehow causes someone else to have less, or that what we have is not justified by some merit we have earned.

In the last few years there has been a lot of talk about "white privilege." And what I have come to understand is that white privilege does not mean that your life hasn't been hard, rather, what it means is that the color of your skin isn't one of the things that makes it harder.

Think about just the people in this room. How many of us in this room today simply because of the color of our skin, have felt like an outsider when entering a synagogue or Jewish institution?

How many of us have even taken the time to wonder what it must feel like to have who you are questioned, your right to be somewhere challenged because someone else thought that you didn't belong?

How painful would it be to walk into a synagogue seeking community only to be told either directly or by inference that you don't belong, that you are not welcomed in that space, before you have even been given the opportunity to say "Shabbat Shalom"?

Now imagine dealing with that on a daily basis, in school, in a grocery store, just walking down the street or going to the neighborhood swimming pool or public park.

How much more difficult would life be?

That is why the Nazis, and so many other governments that Jews have lived under, have forced us to wear yellow stars, or distinctive clothing – to mark us not just as other, but as lesser than. They did this to make it easier for others to discriminate against us.

Because our skin did not mark us as other, so many different countries have sought to put something visible on us, so people knew it was ok to persecute us and dehumanize us.

But all too often it feels like we are living in a society where the color of a person's skin is analogous to the yellow stars Jews were once forced to wear, marking those with darker skin tones as somehow permissible targets for verbal harassment, constant discrimination, and so much worse.

But today of all days, on Yom Kippur, we are confronted with the reminder that none of us goes through life by ourselves, and we are reminded over and over again by the prayers in our machzor that our personal choices and actions have an impact on those around us, just as their choices impact our lives.

Today we are all held accountable - both for the things we've personally said, and the things we failed to say in the face of injustice.

On this day we are also told that we must take responsibility for the sins that were done in the community and in the country we live in, and we will be held accountable for our failures in not doing enough to stop those injustices that have occurred right in front of us, and all around us.

Today is about each of us taking upon our own individual shoulders a sense of shared responsibility for the state of our world.

Today we partake in a communal cheshbon nefesh, a moral or spiritual accounting, for the things we, as a society, have done wrong, and the things that we, as a society, have failed to do to avert those wrongs.

As Jews we live in a strange intersection of privilege and prejudice, knowing the power, and the pain, that comes with each of those things. And it is precisely because of what we as a community have experienced that we know the importance of not standing idly by in the face of injustice, the importance of choosing instead to be allies with individuals and communities that suffer from social stigmas and institutionalized discrimination.

For the last two years the Anti-Defamation League, the ADL, has been reporting a sharp rise in hate crimes and increased activity with white Supremacist organizations. Where we once heard anti-Semitic whispers or racial dog whistles we now hear bull horns spewing out conspiracy theories and hate speech.

We are living at a time when the values we were taught in Religious School and around our diner tables are being put to the test. What we see happening in our society will be the things our children and our grandchildren ask us "what did you do in response?"

And I for one, am more afraid of how my grandchildren will they judge me, than how my God will.

Yom Kippur reminds us of the urgency of now, the need not to wait even another day to choose to live a moral path. The purpose of the spiritual accounting we have been taking throughout these High Holidays is so that we can immediately start a course correction for how we have been behaving, to continue to strive to do better, to always strive to do better.

Last spring I became acutely aware of how much privilege I live with on a daily basis.

On March 27th, I went to the City Council meeting after the shooting of Stephon Clark. I was one of the few white faces in the room that didn't work for the city or the county. And I was one of the few white members of the clergy there.

I went because my friends and colleagues in the African-American community who I have gotten to know and to work with over the last several years asked me to come. I went to bear witness to the pain, to listen to what would be said, to try to understand, and to stand in solidarity with my brothers and sisters who were overflowing with grief and suffering.

The Council Room was filled to overflowing. And what I witnessed can only be described as raw emotion.

What quickly became apparent to me was that this was not about one person or one death. It was about years - NO it was about generations - of frustration from being ignored, of watching their children die, of being afraid, of being treated as "other" or "lesser than" in their own country, in their own city, and in their own homes.

It was about income inequality and being priced out of their own neighborhoods, being tired of sending their children to schools that are underfunded and under resourced.

It was about psychological trauma, generations of trauma, that has been ignored and compounded with repeated retraumatization.

Let me be clear about this, the anger that erupted that night, and in the days and weeks following was not about one incident. It was about a history and a legacy in our country of treating people of color as 2nd class citizens, or not treating them as citizens at all, for the last 300 years. In different ways both legally and socially people of color have been marginalized or discriminated against in every arena of American life.

That doesn't mean that progress hasn't been made. Of course it has. But we are still nowhere near where we should be.

As I sat there and listened to person after person who came up to the microphone, I was painfully aware of the privilege that I walk through the world with on a daily basis, not because of any merit that I have earned, or for any reason that I deserve to be entitled to it, but simply because of the color of my skin, there is so much that I take for granted.

It hurt to see how I live in the same city, but a different reality from so many of my neighbors.

My heart broke wide open that night feeling all of the pain in that room.

So much is broken in our society. So much healing is needed. There is so much repair to be done. So much trust that needs to be given an opportunity to be developed and nurtured.

We need to learn how to look into each other's face and not see strangers, but see, really see, our brothers and our sisters, our neighbors looking back at us.

As I tried to process what I heard that night, these are some of the teachings from our faith that come to mind:

"Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor." (Lev. 19:16)

"Love thy neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18)

"It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it either." (Pirke Avot 2:16)

"What is hateful to you, do not do to another. That is the whole Torah..." (Talmud, Shabbat 31a)

These are the words that I turn to again and again when I feel despair. These are the words that remind me of my obligation not to do what is comfortable, but to do what is right.

These teachings remind me of my obligation not to be complacent in my privilege but to figure out how to make these religious imperatives a social reality.

I have never been so aware of my whiteness and my privilege as I have over the last decade as I've watched, often from the comfort of my living room, images of communities of color who are besieged and targeted and ultimately, ignored.

And I've never been so painfully aware of the type of suffering that motivated the writing of the prayers that fill our Passover Haggadah, our High Holiday Machzor, or our Shabbat Siddur.

I hate reading these prayer-books and feeling like I am reading the daily news.

I wish our holidays and liturgy didn't feel so frightfully relevant to the world we are living in.

As a child I was raised on books like "Free to be You and Me", and Schoolhouse Rock, I loved the Coke commercial and believed that one day we would all "sing in perfect harmony" (yes even me!). I believed that our country was moving closer towards peace and reconciliation, and respect for one another.

Now, I am afraid.

I am afraid of who we are becoming.

I am afraid of what we are.

I am afraid that we are not paying attention to what occurs in our schools and in our cities.

I am afraid that we are becoming numb, or blind or deaf to those who cry out to us for help.

I am afraid that we are not heeding what President Abraham Lincoln called "the better angles of our nature" and that the fraying fabric of our Union will tear apart once again. For those of us who enjoy privilege in this society, we have an obligation, a moral obligation, to our God and to our ancestors, and to our children, to lift the entire society up so that we can all play on a more equal playing field.

We must demand that all people be treated with dignity and fairness and respect, and we must understand that when we do this for others, it does not diminish us, it strengthens us.

So how do we do this? We do it by becoming allies with individuals and groups who are disenfranchised or discriminated against. We do it by actually getting to know our neighbors, hearing their stories, understanding that just because someone's reality is different than our own, it's not less legitimate, it's just different.

And we have to acknowledge that those of us who have privilege need to use it.

We need to use it to build platforms for those who do not, so that their stories can be raised up, and heard.

Freedom, equality, respect, these things are not diminished when they are shared, they are strengthened.

When we work to uplift the lives of others, it does not diminish who we are or what we have.

Someone who understood what it meant to leverage his privilege to benefit others was Julius Rosenwald. Some of you may have heard of him, but he is a man whose story has been largely forgotten.

He was the son of German Jewish immigrants, born during the Civil War. Julius Rosenwald went from being a high school dropout to one of the richest men in America. And while most of us didn't grow up knowing his name, we most certainly knew the name of the company he helped build, Sears, Roebuck, and Co.

Rosenwald was a member of Temple Sinai, a Reform temple in Chicago. During the 1920's as Rosenwald's wealth soared, he was aware and uncomfortable by the fact that his employees were earning less than \$16 a week. So he did what every Jew should do, he went to his rabbi for guidance.

Around that time, on Yom Kippur, Rabbi Emil Hirsch spoke these words to his congregation:

"As long as the weakest in humanity has not his own, civilization is only a sham and a pretender, and as long as civilization is a pretender, Judaism must stand alone as a historic protest against injustice."

Rosenwald took these words to heart. He studied the laws of tzedakah with his rabbi, and in 1910, when he met Booker T. Washington, he found a way to live the Jewish values he had learned.

By the time Rosenwald died on January 6, 1932, not only had he given generously to the Jewish community and to the city of Chicago, but he had transformed the education landscape for African-Americans throughout the South. He helped build 5357 schools, schools that would not have been built or funded if it had been left to the decision of the local school boards. And by 1932, 35% of all African American children in the South went to a Rosenwald school, children like Congressman John Lewis and Maya Angelou, children who grew up to be doctors and attorneys, great artists and musicians.

He funded organizations started by W.E.B. Du Bois that sought to secure legal and political rights for African-Americans. And he created a foundation to support the work of African American artists and performers, like Langston Hughs and Marion Anderson.

And he became what W.E.B. Du Bois admiringly called “the stinging critic of our racial democracy.”

But what made the work he did amazing was how he did it. He did it by being an ally. First, he listened and he learned about the problems that were facing the African American Community. Then he became a partner, working with local African American communities to help them achieve their goals. For Rosenwald, this work was deeply personal, and deeply gratifying. When he died, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote "As a Jew, Julius Rosenwald did not have to be initiated into the methods of race prejudice."

By leveraging his privilege to help his fellow Americans, Rosenwald felt himself empowered and emboldened, not diminished. He felt that what he was doing was good not just for the African American community, but for America, he believed that when one group was given the opportunity to succeed, it strengthened our entire country.

Now sadly, the reality is that most people can not make the type of impact that Julius Rosenwald did. Not on that scale. But that doesn't mean that we can't be allies, it doesn't mean that we can't make a difference, it doesn't mean we can't speak out and take action, like he did when he saw institutionalized racism.

So today I ask those of us who benefit from some sort of privilege, either based on the color of our skin, or our gender, our sexual or gender orientation, our age or our socio-economic standing, I'm asking you, don't shy away from it, but rather, look to Julius Rosenwald as a role model, and be willing to use what privilege you have to help others by being allies in creating a more just and equitable society.

Use it to speak up and speak out against injustices that occur both in our society and in our everyday interactions.

Use it to reach out to those who are being discriminated against because of their gender, their sexual orientation, the color of their skin, or because of their country of origin.

Use it to help protect those who are vulnerable because of their age or their zip-code.

Use the privilege of your voice both to amplify the cries of those who are calling out for help, and use it to reach out to others with words of friendship and solidarity.

Privilege need not be something to hide from if we are willing to use it to ensure that all people are treated with the dignity and equality that is their God given right.

Throughout these High Holidays I have spoken of Hillel's understanding of what is the essence of being Jewish. He taught us that the entire Torah, in fact all of Judaism can be summed up in one sentence: what is hateful to you, do not do to another.

When we apply this teaching to how we interact with each other, through our use of civil speech, or respectful behavior and we honor our differences of gender, ethnicity, or country of origin, or the color of our skin, we are living Torah.

We have all been given the ultimate privilege by God – the privilege of being created in the Image of our Creator, the Image of Holiness, which means we have the ability to be God like.

And what is it to be God like? It is to protect those who are vulnerable, enable those who are powerless, to live as a holy people guided by a set of values that teaches us to

be responsible for one another is something to be embraced, and to understand that each and every one of us has the ability to bring justice, and healing to our world.

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melach ha-olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzi'vanu lirdof tzedek. Blessed are You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, who calls us to holiness, commanding us to pursue justice.

Amen.