

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5777 / 2016

Rabbi Noah Arnow:

I'm going to speak for a few minutes, then I'm thrilled that we have Pardes Lyons-Warren and Chris Pulphus, two high school students who will speak a little, and then I'll close.

Let me tell you about Gramps. My great-grandfather was born in 1904 in Svitskoy, a village in the Ukraine where he shared a one-and-a-half room house with his parents and nine brothers and sisters. His father, known in the family as Grandpa Fievel, was a teacher of Torah. The family traveled to the United States in steerage in 1910. They settled first in Manhattan, where they earned extra money sewing ribbons into corsets, and later they moved to the Bronx.

Gramps, as we called him, was the 7th of 10 children. He worked odd jobs to support himself through high school, including stuffing envelopes at a mail order house. He started college, but couldn't continue because he couldn't pay the tuition. So he found work as a stenographer in a real estate office. He became a broker, and eventually went into business for himself. In 1936, with a handshake, he and his business partner founded a real estate business that would go on to be very successful.

Gramps's son (my great-uncle) and his son-in-law, my grandfather, became partners in the business. The business's success paid for my father's and his siblings' upbringing in a nice suburb with good schools. It paid for college tuitions. It helped pay for my parents to live in that same suburb, for me to go to those same excellent public schools, for college and graduate school tuitions.

I owe so much of what I have, and who I am, to my great-grandfather, to Gramps. And I knew him. He died in 1994, when I was fifteen.

Gramps was what we call a self-made man, the Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches story that America has always loved. This narrative remains strong in our national consciousness, the idea of the meritocracy, that with hard work, determination, and grit, we can "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps" and raise ourselves up into success.

This vaunted ideal, though, leaves aside so much of the rest of the story. Besides hard work and determination, what else allowed Gramps to "make it"?

Gramps would have said something about God looking out for him. He did not take his success for granted. And there is an element of providence, or luck, or whatever you might call it.

Gramps was also smart—business smart. He was lucky, being in the right places at the right times. He worked very hard. He was a man. Women weren't admitted to most local real estate boards until the 1950s. But there was one other critical ingredient that allowed his success in America in the 1930s and '40s.

Gramps was white.

He was able to get a job as a stenographer in a New York real estate office outside of Harlem because he was white.

He was able to be a successful real estate broker outside of Harlem because he was white.

Chances are that he and his business partner were able to get financing for their projects because they were white.

What if Gramps had been black? How would my family's life have been different?

A smart, hardworking, entrepreneurial yet penniless African-American man in New York in the 1930s and 1940s would have had many fewer options of jobs open to him, and a real glass ceiling in many kinds of business, including real estate. And those limited options hinged on his skin tone.

Skin color limited opportunities for accumulation of wealth, for buying a home that kept its value, for being able to afford to live in a place with great schools, so that kids could get a great education and good-paying employment, for that generation and subsequent generations.

Gramps had the privilege of being white. Gramps was not at fault for this privilege; neither am I, or any of us who have benefited from being white. While I probably do have a measure of guilt about it, I can't rightfully feel guilty because I was born into this privilege.

But I need to acknowledge it, to be aware of it. And I need to own it. Because unless and until I do that, I cannot begin to understand the other side of the coin of privilege, which is oppression.

And this is the topic I want to speak about today--my own evolving awareness of the privileges in my own life that have come from my skin color. And a vision for Kol Rinah this year of engaging in the hard work, as a community, of looking inward, first, so that we can look outward, and be engaged in the holy fight against injustice and oppression.

Oppression, you say? Hold on a minute -- Jews -- we know oppression. Oh, we understand oppression. And, of course, we do.

The counter-narrative to all of this is that Gramps was also a victim of oppression. His family fled Russia for a reason, probably some combination of economic and religious persecution. And we know there was and is anti-Semitism in America. So many of us have been victims of oppression as Jews, and if not us, then those in previous generations.

But here's the synthesis, the challenge: we have to learn how to say, "Yes, and." We have to be able to own our identities as victims of oppression which we did not deserve, in the ancient and recent past, and today too, sometimes. And we also need to learn how to own our identities as beneficiaries of privilege, which we also did not deserve, in the more recent past and now in the present.

I'll have some more to say about how this connects to Rosh Hashanah and where we as a congregation will go with this in a few minutes.

But right now, it's my pleasure to introduce two students and visionary young leaders, Pardes Lyons-Warren and Chris Pulphus.

Pardes grew up here at Kol Rinah, is the membership/Kadima vice president of our United Synagogue Youth (USY) chapter. She is a junior at Ladue High School.

Chris is a senior at Cardinal Ritter High School. They both participated in Cultural Leadership, an amazing program and organization in St. Louis that brings together Jewish and African-American teens across economic and racial lines for a year of study and engagement with social justice, culminating in a three-week trip through the South and to Washington DC.

Please listen to what they have to say generously, with an open heart, and with resilience, if and when you hear something that makes you uncomfortable.

Pardes Lyons Warren:

Shana Tovah. My name is Pardes Lyons-Warren, I'm on board in our USY chapter and you'll probably see me around the halls here throughout the year. I'm excited to be here with my friend Chris speaking to my home congregation.

Last year I participated in Cultural Leadership. This is a program for high schoolers that looks at social justice through an African American and Jewish lens. We spend one year learning about the history of the two cultures and end our year with a 3 week trip across the East Coast and Deep South. On our trip we visit landmarks of the civil rights movement, slavery, and Jewish history. Knowing that that was the mission of the program, I entered the year wearing my Jewish identity on my sleeve. I expected to explore that side of me most that year. I also assumed my peers would look at me as a Jew first and foremost. I didn't even think about my whiteness and the fact that that trait was the most visible to others. Throughout my whole life I have been surrounded by Jews, whether here at shul, at my summer camp, or in my fairly Jewish high school. In these environments, and other places where I may be one of few Jews, I have always shared my Judaism. Most of these communities, however, have also been predominantly white. It's easy to forget the color of your skin when you're in the majority, and I am no exception. Because I've had to present my Judaism to people, but not my whiteness, I slipped into a blurred mindset. I almost forgot being white was an identity at all.

When I started Cultural Leadership I was reminded that I am, in fact, white. On our first day we did an activity where different demographics sat in an inner circle and talked about stereotypes. The first group I was in was white females. We had to be reminded a few times that we were supposed to talk about our white, not Jewish, identities. There was to be a Jewish circle later. This made me see that I was not the only person blindly ignoring my skin tone.

This privilege of being able to forget your skin tone plagues most white people, in fact, and not just Jews. It is important however to keep your skin tone in mind, and the privilege that comes with it. During the program my peers and I learned about how brought history Jews and African Americans have both faced oppression. Whether it is the holocaust, lynchings, or everyday day acts of aggression and hate. But they also reminded me how though the Jewish and African American experiences have these parallels, there is one key difference. I can hide my Judaism when necessary, or even when I just feel like it. They cannot hide their black skin. This difference was something I learned from Cultural Leadership about white Jews that I did not expect to.

Another unexpected lesson I learned came from internal reflection, and specifically from a program we participated in in New Orleans, facilitated by a Cultural Leadership Alumni named Matt. Matt had us split into two groups, a black caucus and a white caucus. We were given a list of questions to answer on our own and then we would discuss them together. These included prompts to search through our memory for different events; an "inventory of racial experience." I had to think of times when I may have treated black people differently than whites and the moment when I learned that whites created and maintained slavery.

Out of 12 prompts I could only think of 6 answers, though looking back I can respond to a few more. There are some that I still cannot fully pinpoint however, like, for instance, the

moment I became aware of discrimination against people of color. I've grown up in a very liberal household. We talk about current events at the dinner table and my parents encourage diversity and tzedakah. Because of this I've always known about racism in the world. Or at least I can't recall a single moment I saw it for the first time. I had a similar reaction to many of the other questions on the list and so did my peers. After a small discussion about our responses to the sheet, we rejoined our black peers in the other room. Everyone was to share some of their responses with the group but it was clear the white students were far more reluctant to share. In reflecting on the program I asked myself why that was. I realized it was because admitting we had at some point not been aware of discrimination, or saying out loud specific racial prejudices we may have had in the past, shattered the image we held of ourselves. We were supposed to be perfect allies. We were the teens in St. Louis that were activists, leaders, the perfect social justice warriors. Obviously I just described some super teen that doesn't exist. But being in programs like Cultural Leadership, I sometimes framed myself that way. This happens a lot when people volunteer a lot or fight against injustice. These are great things to do, but we mustn't allow ourselves to pretend we're perfect. It was hard to tell a room full of social justice leaders that I admire, that I have had discriminatory thoughts. But it was liberating. Now that I've admitted I'm not pure perfection, I can work more towards making myself a better ally.

Christopher Pulphus:

Shalom.

When I was in Cultural Leadership I learned about the Jewish faith and culture by studying, visiting synagogues, and meeting rabbis. Cultural Leadership gave me a great glimpse of the Jewish faith. I haven't learned everything, but what I have taken away from Judaism is the resilience, support, and unity between the members of this faith. Our 21 day Transformational Journey, through Cultural Leadership, is a testament to that. I have come to admire the closeness of the Jewish community and I am happy to be here with you. Today, I want to focus on comfort and what that looks like for you all and for me. All of us can agree that being comfortable constitutes support, security, and blissful unawareness. Many of us like those things. I mean who wouldn't? Agreeable opinions, constant believing in yourself, sounds pretty golden if you ask me. Like enjoying a sweet glass full of lemonade. But we can all agree that life isn't always golden and often times life will give you lemons before lemonade. But if you're used to drinking that nice cold glass full of lemonade you may never check to see if it's just lemon juice. You'll be caught off guard because you were expecting something sweet and got something so tart and bitter. That is comfort in today's society. Because comfort puts you at rest with its soothing lullabies only to have you startled awake by the jarring booms of reality.

I was comfortable in the cheerful bubble of Cultural Leadership. I mean, this is a program where we are taught to open up and be our full selves in the midst of one another, to grow a bond stronger than any other, and to go out and fight oppression of all forms with one another side by side. If you ask me, we were like the Breakfast Club, Social Justice Style. Cultural Leadership teaches students how to facilitate Courageous Conversations and while facilitating a Courageous Conversation, I was caught off guard.

In the Courageous Conversation, my partner and I facilitated a discussion over stereotypes in the media. An example we used was the negative portrayal of African American males with the context of us being thugs, gangsters, and criminals. So as we were offering this

example, a member of the Jewish community and parent of a dear classmate raised his hand and began a conversation that went a little like this. He asked, "Well what if these things are true?"

I asked him to clarify what he was asking and he said, "I mean it can't be a stereotype if it's true."

Slowly a cold feeling crept into my heart as I asked him to again clarify and he said, "For the African American male example you gave you're giving them the benefit of the doubt but it can't be a stereotype if the information is true which it usually is."

At this point I was not only offended and appalled at the audacity that this man had feeling so comfortable that he could say that black males typically are thugs and gang members but hurt because I, a black male, stood before him presenting this information. What did this make me of me? Am I not also a black male?

I stopped the man respectfully saying, "Ouch, that hurt," and proceeded to tell him how what he said was not only disrespectful but racist. And he wouldn't listen. He argued that I was different and that I'm not the average black male. And I wanted to ask him, "Why? Why am I so different?" Was it because I was wearing a tie? Was it because of the way I spoke? Because little did he know I live in North City near Fairground Park. He also didn't know that I was a Ferguson Protester and labeled by that same media as a thug, rioter, and criminal. What would he think now?

There is something called White Privilege. This may be a term that you all have heard. And it means that due to the color of your skin you have a higher chance of success, higher chances of being in spaces that you find favorable, and easier access to necessities than a person of color would. You all may wonder how this ties into comfort. So let me ask you, how many spaces are you in that are majority black? How many spaces do you need to be in that are majority black? Or even half black? Most of you, if not all of you, will say none. The reason why this is, is because white people in this society typically have life better than those of color. This means better jobs, schooling, housing, businesses, etc. And because of this fact white people are surrounded by their peers of the same color and work for people of the same color and never think twice about their skin. Whereas I have to go into those spaces and be uncomfortable with a group of people that are not my own skin color just to receive a portion of those benefits I listed earlier. The fact that I have to do that and you all do not is a privilege that you have.

A more concrete and recent example is on September 21st of this year. In another program that both Pardes and I are in, safety within the program became a topic of discussion. The participants of the program were assured that they were safe, as the program had great relations with the police. Now for most of you all that's reassuring, but the idea of an officer in the vicinity of that space put on edge not only me, but almost every black person in the program. That's not an experience most of you will be able to speak to.

Now this is not a game of saying who has life better. The point is not to give you a sob story because in all honesty worst things in my life have happened. I won't tell you all that you are at fault for my life and where it is presently at. Now is the time in which I inquire for you all to understand that there is oppression all around us and with that oppression comes privileges. I learned that as Jewish people you have been oppressed a lot in your history but while you

were oppressed in the past many of you have privileges today. Not based on your religion but what is more recognizable on the surface. Such as your gender, race, age or even financial class.

Pardes Lyons Warren:

Today we are celebrating Rosh Hashanah, our new year. During this time we as a community do a lot of reflection. During the next weeks we'll think about the past year, throw away our sins, and ask for forgiveness.

Chris Pulphus:

In order to cleanse yourself for the year to come I encourage you all to become more aware of these privileges that you have. With that in mind we'd like to leave you with a few questions to help guide that reflection.

First, think about oppression and the ways discrimination happens against people of color in the community?

Pardes Lyons Warren:

How can you use your privilege to keep that discrimination from happening?

Thank you, and hag sameach!

Thank you, Chris and Pardes, for your words, your honesty. Believe me, it's not easy to get up in front of a congregation like this and speak. This is also part of Cultural Leadership—inspiring and training a new generation of social justice visionaries to work practically and speak publicly.

If you see Pardes or Chris in the hallway later, I hope you will go up to them and say *Yasher Koach*—that means “great job.” You might be inclined particularly to say to Chris, “I was impressed by how articulate you are.” Because wasn't he articulate!?

But what you may be implying by saying that is that you didn't expect him, a young, black guy, to be articulate. So instead of saying how articulate Chris was, talk to him about the *content* of what he said.

You heard Pardes talk about realizing she can choose when she's visibly Jewish, and choose when she wants to “pass” as being just white, while people of color can't take off the kippah, like I can. Pardes also told about the moment when she realized that even as a staunch ally of people of color, she was not perfect. We all have been acculturated into a world that makes instantaneous judgments based on color. It's a very long, hard road to undo that acculturation, that programming. Perhaps it's impossible. But we can at least become aware of it, and act and speak with some thought, and not based not on our first, pre-conditioned judgments

Chris spoke powerfully about how it feels to be stereotyped, even accidentally, as a thug. He pointed out the privilege most of us have of usually being with people who look like us, who treat us as equals. And he reminded us that our reaction to having uniformed police officers here at Kol Rinah may make us feel safer, but may be threatening to people of color, based on past experiences and encounters with law enforcement.

How does this all connect to Rosh Hashanah? Why are we exploring this today? Rosh Hashanah is as universalistic a holiday as we have. It celebrates the creation of the world, and the creation of humanity. Not the creation of the Jews. Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot—those are about *Jewish* history. But Rosh Hashanah is about the whole world. Maybe Rosh Hashanah should be the holiday when Jews think particularly about the world, and their role and place in

it, about the ways we are indeed an *or lagoyim*, “a light unto the nations,” and when we consider also how and where we need to turn that light back onto ourselves.

This year, we have some work as individuals, as a shul, and as a broader Jewish community when it comes to developing a Jewish discipline or ethic of anti-racism, to use Temple University Professor Elliot Ratzman’s phrase.

I’ve been reading widely and deeply in this area for months now, and because of that work, I can start to understand how my great-grandfather, grandmother, my father, and I have been privileged. I can start to understand how people of color see me as someone white, and therefore privileged. And I can begin to consider how to interact with people of color in ways that do not perpetuate or accentuate the privilege into which I was born. I can start to understand how others have been oppressed. And I can start to think about what do about it, and how to be an ally in changing the systems in our community and in our nation that perpetuate this kind of privilege.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced,” said James Baldwin.

I want to invite you—each of you, to join me on this journey. This may feel uncomfortable or unwelcome to you. It may feel like too much. Or like not enough. But I want to invite you to come, read a book, a chapter, an article, and have a conversation. Let’s start there. We will have some reading groups, book groups, and discussion groups around the topics of race, whiteness, and privilege, and thinking about how Judaism and our Jewishness intersects and interacts with race, whiteness and privilege.

We’ll have different times, frequencies, venues and formats for engaging. If you’re interested in helping to organize this learning, please be in touch after the holiday.

I’m also excited to announce that we’ll be bringing a scholar-in-residence to Kol Rinah in the late winter to do some teaching and training on these issues with us. I’m hoping to have things finalized by the end of holiday season.

As we learn more about these issues, and learn more about ourselves, we’ll become better prepared and more motivated to be allies in the holy justice work our community and our nation need.

I know we all in this congregation do not react the same way to these conversations. We see things differently amongst ourselves, we feel things differently; we have different histories and have had different experiences. Many of us are white; and some of us are people of color. I want to acknowledge that diversity, of opinion, of background, of skin color.

These conversations will make us all uncomfortable, to varying degrees at different times. And so I ask you, are you willing to be a little uncomfortable? I hope the answer will be yes. If you are willing to be a little uncomfortable, try to understand why you are willing—what about this matters to you enough to be uncomfortable? And if you are not willing to be a little uncomfortable, try to understand why you are not.

Pardes and Chris gave us much, much to think about this Rosh Hashanah and High Holiday season. Here’s a little High Holiday homework. Between now and Yom Kippur, have a conversation with someone in your family about your family’s history here in America. What about your family’s history in America, and your own history, was enabled or hindered by the

color of your skin? And how might your family's lot in life look different if they're and your skin were a different color?

May we find blessings in understanding ourselves, and our history better.

May we be able to love ourselves, so that we will be able to truly love our neighbors.

And may this year be sweet for all of us, made sweeter with the joy and fulfillment of doing hard, meaningful work, for ourselves, and for the world.

Shana tova umetukah.