

Two years after the worst race riots that Cincinnati had ever seen, while the three largest synagogues were following their members out to suburbs, my parents bought a house in a self-consciously integrated inner city neighborhood. It was more convenient to my father's work and would allow my brother and me to attend Cincinnati's 75 year old prestigious college-prep public high school, but the suburbs offered good schools too. It was a conscious decision, consistent with other choices my parents had made, like befriending the African American couple who moved across the street when I was in third grade, to the dismay of the neighbors fearful of Brooklyn's changing demographics. My father was a lifelong member of the NAACP, and loved to tell stories about his friendship with the only African American woman in his medical school class. Yet in my father's final declining months, horrible racial epithets would come out of his mouth. The Parkinson's was affecting his mind as well as his body. His brain was like a lamp with a loose wire, sometimes it went on but often it did not. Yet what struck me most, was that in this man who prided himself on being race blind, who was a passionate believer in meritocracy and who had done his part to encourage the advancement of African Americans, there still existed the residue of the times in which he grew up and the negative attitudes of the people around him.

The question of whether people who do not identify as racists, who don't hold racist views, who may even be African American, can hold within themselves, at a subconscious level, negative stereotypes and prejudices, is one which our society is beginning to face. It is part of looking at the outcomes of systems which ostensibly were race neutral, but have led to such disparate results by race in incarceration, sentencing, and the imposition of the death penalty.

It is a painful issue but one which on this day of radical honesty we must face.

How is it that in a country that rejected racism in electing an African American president, there are so many shootings of unarmed African Americans, with so few being called to account for that behavior? And how is it that we, good people, have remained oblivious to these problems which are so much a part of the lives of some of our neighbors?

My Christian colleagues are easily identified by their collars, and as a result they get certain privileges in everyday life, like going ahead in line, or sometimes even receiving a free meal. In calling forth respect, a clergy collar can also confer certain benefits. As a rabbi, I'm not as easily identified, though I have been offered a free challah at Mama's and get respectful recognition when testifying at Town Council.

I am most aware of my rabbinic privilege when not experiencing it. When someone is really rude, or talks past me as if I wasn't there, it is often true that they are not aware of my role in our congregation. Because I am used to being given certain deference, I am spoiled, used to more respect than my gender or age might usually command.

If you are white, economically secure, speak without a foreign accent, have parents who were already upper middle class, then you probably experience privilege in everyday life as well. You are more likely to be comfortable with authority figures, to be used to being treated as a customer, rather than a potential shoplifter or mugger, when shopping, and to be able to fit in in at business or formal occasions, without anyone asking you what you are doing there or where you are from.

Jewish tradition is actually not opposed to certain kinds of privilege. Respect for parents and teachers was an expectation- and there was rabbinic privilege. Old fashioned things like standing when someone came in the room, or reserving their chair or regular place, are mentioned in the Talmud. There are also extensive discussions of what to do when different privileges collide- when for example, there could be a time conflict in respecting both parent and teacher. While in

general men were the recipients of these honors, there were some situations in which women were to be privileged over men, typically for their protection.

But our tradition also has a wariness about privilege. We are warned in the Torah against granting privileges to some that we don't give to others, especially in court. The classic statement is in the holiness code. "Lo tehdar penei gadol, do not show deference to the rich", or it could translated, "don't treat more dearly those who are prominent people" (Leviticus 19:15) . The concern is also found in the legal codes of Exodus and Deuteronomy. In Exodus 23:2 we are told: "neither shall you side with the mighty to do wrong". In Deuteronomy 1:17 we are taught: "You shall not be partial in judgement, hear out low and high alike". From this the rabbis derived the obligation, not to listen to one party in a court case before the other arrives, a kind of transparency our American court system requires as well. Finally, later in Deuteronomy we also have the reminder (16:19): "You shall not judge unfairly, you shall show no partiality"- lo takir panim- literally, you shall not recognize faces. This is a definite part of privilege today, knowing people, or knowing people who know people. It is an aspect of privilege I use consciously, hopefully for the good. In Israel it's a finely developed art and even has a name, protecksia.

In early September I received a jury notice for today, which thankfully, without even using proteksia, I was able to postpone. I was joking with people that I wouldn't be able to be at Kol Nidrei because of jury duty, and they shared their own stories. One person was let off a jury because she knew the lawyer, they worked out at the same gym; another because he knew the judge, she was his patient. Privilege is not something sinister, but it is easy to see how it messes with the idea of a level playing field where everyone gets a fair shot.

The discussion of white privilege is often very sensitive- especially among Jews. White privilege, we snort- tell that to my grandmother with a number on her arm, tell that to my cousins who are in Brazil because they couldn't get into the United States from Eastern Europe because of the quota system that worked against Jews in the years leading up to World War II. What about the anti-Semitic white supremacist groups who feel free today to express their hate online and in the media.

But these particular situations don't negate the general case. To a greater or lesser degree, depending on whether we are red haired Ashkenazim, darker skinned Mizrahi Jews, or of another racial background, many of us share in white privilege in this country. It is so normal to us we don't realize that it is a privilege

yet we benefit in a variety of ways. When people see us, they normally assume we are safe and upstanding, and when we look around at media or at people in authority, we see others like ourselves. If our children or their friends engage in teenage shenanigans they get a warning, rather than being taken down to juvenile hall or dying of gunshots in the street. Scholar Peggy McIntosh describes “white privilege” in these words:

“I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.”

The discussion of white privilege is meant to create sensitivity to the situations that arise for those who lack this privilege, for those about whom negative assumptions are made, and snap judgements which in some situations lead to their death. Each time this happens there is community outcry and regret, yet the frequency with which this continues to occur bellies the idea that the problem is a couple of bad apples. But instead of our confronting the stereotypes we still have within our unconscious minds about people of color, I hear outcry about black privilege, as if the small attempts at balancing privilege had overwhelmed our system.

There is a concern in Jewish jurisprudence about over compensating. The verse from Leviticus which warns us about not favoring those of high status in court, also warns against leaning towards the underdog, Rabbi Plaut's commentary states: "The Torah repeatedly admonishes judges to uphold justice unswervingly. Misguided sympathy should not lead the judge to show favoritism to the poor. "

Neither my anecdotal experience nor studies of who benefits in our society could lead to the conclusion that we are in danger of violating the Biblical prohibition of favoritism towards the poor or minorities. Benefits given based on minority or economic status are small change compared to those received by more affluent members of our society. African Americans lag on every measure of well being from infant mortality to life expectancy, educational attainment and household wealth.

My personal experience has given me just a glimpse at some of the disabilities people of color confront daily. A couple of years ago I was coming back from Costa Rica with a group of our Temple high school students. All of the students were racially white except one who was racially Latino. Can you guess who was stopped at immigration, though his American passport was in order? I was in a panic and not terribly polite when they wanted to take him away for questioning

in a back room and not allow me to come along, but he was calm and collected, clearly having had “the talk” with his mom as he was growing up.

Many of the African Americans in our valley are highly successful and affluent, and my youngest daughter had a friend from robotics whose father was a vp of engineering, I believe at Apple. Visiting their palatial home made her ask me about affirmative action. Then she happened to be over there one day when her friend’s brother was stopped by the police for the crime of being an African American young man driving in Portola Valley. It’s complicated. There is a reason we talk about Black Lives mattering. It is not that other lives don’t, but rather than we need to be reminded that Black lives do.

I know it feels threatening that in some communities, Black Lives Matter has taken up the Boycott Divestment Sanctions cause as well. In San Jose, the movement is called Beloved Community and only addresses local issues, working actively with the leadership of the police department as well as the independent police auditor. Here in Silicon Valley the African American and Jewish community work together regularly on common issues. Earlier this year, for example, the investigation of a death in the county jail lead to uncovering racist tweets from a group of sheriff’s deputies. Further investigation found that they were also texting

anti-Semitic, Anti-Immigrant and Anti-Asian comments. The head of the union, who has since been replaced, even shared images of a Nazi swastika. In one message, he referred to a “k-e,” using an ethnic slur against Jews and suggesting that lampshades be made from his “hide.” At a meeting on the Thursday night before Rosh Hashanah, the head of our local NAACP spoke directly to our need to work together. He pointed to the actions which have been taken by many African American groups to distance themselves from that particular BDS- BLM platform. David Bernstein CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and other American Jewish communal leaders urge us not to disengage or absent ourselves from the struggle for racial justice, because of this issue, but to lean in and remain part of the conversation. Recently our JCRC received a grant to bring together Jewish and African American millennials, and I hope some of our members or their children will participate.

The Union for Reform Judaism, our national movement, while condemning the BLM platform’s language on Israel and the Palestinian territories, has committed to working on issues of structural racism and has put feet on the ground particularly in relationship to criminal justice reform and voter registration. Here in California, Reform Jewish leadership played a role in the bill recently signed by Governor Brown, severely curtaining solitary confinement for youth, an extremely

detrimental practice which had been disproportionately imposed on black youth.

In South Carolina and other key states, our Reform movement is bringing people in from out of state to work against voter suppression.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most revered Jewish theologians of the 20th century, argued that racism is a subset of the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is worshipping a part of creation over its totality, thus racism denies the core teaching of our faith, the oneness underlying the diversity of God's creation. To Heschel, the uprooting of racism is a mitzvah gedolah, a major commandment, a challenge to all serious Jews .

It is a mitzvah to do the work of overcoming the legacy of slavery. It is a mitzvah to uproot institutional discrimination, reduce mass incarceration, reverse housing segregation, and reform the law.

On the ballot right here in California this fall are measures (57 and 62) which address respectively the disproportionate incarceration of people of color and the death penalty, which as practiced in America today lacks protections for the accused that Jewish law established almost 2,000 years ago.

Yom Kippur is a time to face the things that we have avoided facing all year long. Sometimes those are very personal things, regarding our failings as parents and

children, husbands and wives. But our rabbis have taught that the key verse in the whole Torah is “Thou Shall Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself,” forcing our concern out of our homes and into the communities in which we live. For each of us there may be something different which calls us to action. Some may be moved by the unrelenting statistics in Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow. My son described crying on the train as he was reading Bryan Stevenson’s Just Mercy, about the plight of those wrongly accused, or abandoned without legal defense. I think of Philando Castile, the beloved school cafeteria worker from Minneapolis. After he was killed, it came out that he had been pulled over for minor infractions 52 times in the past 14 years. Many of these stops came after Minnesota’s 2003 state commissioned study which found that although minority drivers were more likely to be both stopped and searched, officers found contraband more often when searching white drivers.

How long can we allow this unequal treatment? How long until our legal system offers to everyone the protections we demand for ourselves? I go to jail only a few times a year to visit our incarcerated members, but that is not the case for my African American colleagues. We cannot stand idly by the blood of our brothers, or as Rabbi Heschel said so often, “In a free society, few are guilty, but all are responsible.”

Tonight as we look deeply into our own hearts, let us examine the assumptions and “taken for granted’s” that prevent us from treating all people with the respect their humanity deserves.