1. WELCOME

Before we begin, let’s review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

- **Accountability:** I’ll show up for eight meetings over the next eight months. Or I’ll let the host know the [good] reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone’s time. Which means that meetings will start and end on time, no matter how good the schmoozing.
- **Presence:** When we’re together, I’ll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
- **Double Confidentiality:** I’ll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. That means that even when I see group member in another context, like at Central or in the neighborhood, I won’t bring up what has been shared in our group unless you open the conversation.
- **Vulnerability:** I’ll stretch myself to be as open and honest as I can with my perspectives and experiences to create a safe environment that might encourage others to takes risks, too.
- **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
- **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to “solve their problem.” No advice unless it’s asked.
- **Listening:** I understand that some of us are talkers and some of us are quieter, so I’ll be aware to not dominate discussions or always leave the weight of it to others.
- **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
• **Ownership:** This is our group. This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

## 2. ASK AND SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Please share one way that you feel fortunate in your life. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

![Note space]

## 3. LEARN

We all, in different ways, have advantages in our society. An able-bodied person will have a much easier time navigating many public transit systems (not all of which are outfitted with elevators or ramps at every stop) than someone in a wheelchair. A student who is able to attend college without working several part-time jobs will have more time and energy to focus on studies and other interests, and might even be able to afford to take a prestigious, door-opening unpaid internship. Some transgendered people fear animosity and even violence every time they’re forced to choose a gendered public bathroom—an experience most people who are not trans do not have. A person of color is more likely than a white person to be singled out for “additional screening” in the airport security line or followed around by suspicious security in a store.

When we understand the ways in which we have social advantages, we are better able to situate ourselves in our larger social context. And when we do that, we may be better able to hear the stories of those who are different from us, and to be clear about the ways in which our society operates. This then also enables us to make decisions about what, if anything, we want to do with the advantages that we do have.
This is one of two possible options for the central LEARN text for this session. We recommend that you choose one of the two texts and go deeply into the questions and issues that it raises, rather than trying to address both texts in one conversation. There will be additional opportunities for reflection in the PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION section.

Adam Falkner explores a formative experience around race in his spoken word piece, “The Definition of Privilege.” Please watch this video of his performance: http://bit.ly/1nIwKHT. A modified version of the text of the piece is on the next page. The piece is dense, so it may make sense to take a moment to read through the text a second time after watching the video, or to read it aloud together once or twice as a group. This is a version of a longer piece.

Nathan and Davis had the wad of bills we stole from Davis’ father’s work coat so when they led us down the block to Hop In we followed because we were thirsty and had no idea the darker skinned of us would only minutes later end up with their chests on the pavement, a stranger’s hands scaling their waistlines and thighs while the lighter skinned of us would watch from the sidewalk with our tongues pretzeled into knots like the barrels of cartoon rifles

and I was nine-years-old on the verge of a fifteen-year obsession to prove I was not whatever it was that kept me off the pavement alongside Nathan and Davis,

first by quitting classical piano lessons and growing my hair out and studying the blues then traveling across continents with groups of quasi-guilty Christians to build schools in Peru or community centers in Israel or soccer fields in Mexico or Whereverthefuck

and then working up the nerve to rock matching track suits every day in the upper lot at Pioneer High School and basketball jerseys two sizes too-big and start drinking forties of Old English malt liquor like Ice Cube with kids who lived in Eagle Point and North Maple and reciting Too Short verses to my crush at the bus stop where I eventually started smoking so much weed before school that I got suspended for vomiting in the trash can during my third period English class

and had to go to summer school which I really used as an opportunity to distribute the first of many mixtapes in my very serious rap career that I swore would be my “ticket outta here” on which I used spoonfuls of words my mother didn’t understand until I finally [not somehow] landed in college

and registered mostly for classes in which I was the only white person where a professor asked me to share the earliest memory I had of race so I told the story of Nathan and Davis and Hop In and the stranger’s hands

and she asked why whiteness made me so uncomfortable and I said It doesn’t

but then I said Because I don’t ever think about it
and she replied Not having to think about something sounds like a pretty amazing privilege

and then I started seeing kids who looked just like me (everywhere) whose whole lives were bending into knots like the barrels of cartoon rifles just to prove they weren’t whatever it was that kept me off the pavement when I was nine-years-old,

which is to say guilty for something they didn’t do

which is to say I never owned slaves,

I’d never say the N-word – ever,

which is to say invisible

which is to say I don’t really have a race

which is to say the option of silence.

After you’ve read through the poem a second time, here are a few questions to consider:

**Interpretive Questions**

- What’s going on in this poem? Try to paraphrase it in a few sentences.
- Why did Falkner develop an “obsession to prove [he] was not whatever it was that kept [him] off the pavement alongside Nathan and Davis”? How did it manifest?
- Why did Falkner’s experience at age nine make him feel “guilty for something [he] didn’t do which is to say I never owned slaves”? Do you think that there’s truth to this understanding of his?
- In what ways does Falkner think that privilege offers “the option of silence”? How did that insight impact how he regarded his choices?

**Reflective Questions**

- Do you think having privilege offers “the option of silence”?
- In what ways do you lack privilege? Do you think places where you’re not privileged make it harder for you to see the ways in which you do benefit from the way that society is organized?
- How have those benefits affected you? What feelings do you have about them?
- Think back to what you said you felt fortunate to have in your life. How would your life be different if you didn’t have that thing in your life?
- Does having privilege come with certain obligations? Why or why not?
Tal Fortgang, a student at Princeton University, wrote a controversial article about privilege for a campus paper; it went viral when it was republished by *Time* magazine. In it, he describes the ways in which his grandparents were persecuted during the Holocaust, and their hard work, upon getting to the United States with no money and no English, to start a new life. He suggests that those who tell him to “check his privilege” think that he “ought to feel personally apologetic because white males seem to pull most of the strings in the world.” This, he argues, diminishes his personal accomplishments and overlooks the ways in which members of his own family suffered to provide him with a better life. Responses to his thesis appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Salon*, *Newsweek*, *Vice*, *The Guardian*, *BBC News*, *Ebony*, and many other publications.

Daniel Gastfriend, a recent Princeton graduate, responded to Fortgang in *The Huffington Post*. Please read this excerpt from his article, “Reflections on Privilege: An Open Letter to Tal Fortgang,” together as a group. You can find the whole piece online here: http://huff.to/1jaNF7R

Dear Tal,

Like many others, I read your piece, “Checking My Privilege: Character as the Basis of Privilege” -- a retort to the motto “check your privilege” which, you argue, aims to devalue your opinion as a white male and make you feel guilty for your privilege. Although we do not know each other, we both come from families of Holocaust survivors, grew up in Jewish-American homes, and studied at Princeton. And I agree -- we do not need to apologize for our origins. Nothing about this notion, however, justifies blindness to inequality.

My maternal grandfather grew up in Nuremberg, Germany. After barely escaping a Hitler Youth attempt to drive a nail through his head, he fled with his family in 1938 for the United States. My paternal grandfather was not so lucky. Born to an Orthodox Jewish family in Sosnowiec, Poland, he witnessed at age 13 the annihilation of everything and everyone he held dear under Nazi rule. He faced brutality...over three years in the concentration camps, the horrors of the death march, the grief of witnessing his dying cousin tossed alive into a mass grave. Through incredible fortitude and luck, he managed to survive. And although the nightmares plague him to this day, he eventually became a successful businessman in the United States, providing a young family with a better life.

Two generations later, I am free from the violence that tormented my grandfathers and have so far enjoyed a life of remarkable opportunity. Like you, I am fiercely proud of how my family came to be where we are today.
One could take a number of different perspectives on how our family histories relate to the notion of privilege. Yours is understandable: Your ancestors fought relentlessly, and against all odds, to build a new life for your family. This is a legacy to be celebrated, and you should not feel guilty for their resilience or success.

But I find another angle more compelling. I grew up with a set of privileges of which my grandfather could only have dreamed. The injustices he faced -- and the senseless lottery of birth that condemned him to such suffering -- make me inclined to seek out inequality and injustice in whatever forms they take. Included among these are many of the structures that the phrase “check your privilege” means to challenge. While I agree this expression should not be used to silence anyone’s opinion, I believe it can make us more cognizant of the privilege that comes with our social position, how that privilege shapes our perspective, and the manifold obstacles that burden so many others... Yes, it is possible to achieve prosperity in the face of such inequalities and worse, as our grandparents so remarkably did. This does not mean we should tolerate them.

You vehemently defend the American meritocracy. Indeed, there is something marvelous about a country in which immigrants as extraordinarily disadvantaged as our grandparents could build a new life for themselves and their children. You also write, “It’s not a matter of white or black, male or female or any other division which we seek, but a matter of the values we pass along, the legacy we leave, that perpetuates ‘privilege.’” I wish this were the entire story.

What your piece misses is a recognition that, despite the successes of families like our own, harmful structural inequalities persist on the basis of class, race, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in the U.S. Children growing up in poor areas often attend public schools with significantly less funding than those born in affluent areas (a disparity that does not exist in most developed countries); almost one in five American women are survivors of completed or attempted rape; individuals with non-conforming sexual and gender identities face high rates of workplace discrimination and violent crime; blacks are given harsher prison sentences for the same offenses than whites; resumes with black-sounding names are 50 percent less likely to get called back than equivalent ones with white-sounding names, and emails to University professors with minority or female names are 25 percent less likely to get responses than those with white male names; the list goes on.

Being aware of these issues -- and of the fact that we, by nature of our race and gender, are shielded from many of them -- is the first step towards rectifying them. And while I share your enthusiasm for the meritocratic elements of American society that allowed our families to flourish, I find deeply troubling the fact that income mobility is lower in the U.S. than in the vast majority of developed countries; 70 percent of people born into the bottom quintile of the income distribution in America never reach the middle.

Like you, I strive to carry on the spirit of my grandparents’ hard work. But I also know I have unfairly benefited from a society that favors affluent, white, heterosexual men. While this privilege is not the entire story of why I am where I am today, it does exist, as do the damaging inequalities that continue to fuel it. My family’s painful history does not nullify these injustices; on the contrary, it highlights the imperative to expose and erase them.
Several years ago, my paternal grandfather brought our extended family on a trip to Poland. He took us to the village where he grew up, the ghetto his family was forced into, and finally, to Auschwitz. Shaking with tears, he implored us: “Whenever you see evil in the world, you must cry out, you must act! Never be silent in the face of injustice.”

The first step to address injustice is to acknowledge the way it manifests in the world. I am privileged -- in part due to the opportunities my grandparents provided me, but also in part due to my social position in American society. And in honor of my grandparents’ legacy, I refuse to be content with a society where equality of opportunity is still not extended to all, and where racism, sexism, and prejudice continue to exist -- in any form.

Sincerely,
Daniel Gastfriend

As you reflect on this letter, here are a few questions to consider:

**Interpretive Questions**
- What conclusions does Gastfried draw from his family’s history?
- Gastfriend writes that he has “unfairly benefited from a society that favors affluent, white, heterosexual men.” In what ways does he mean that he has benefitted *unfairly*?
- What does Gastfriend understand the phrase “check your privilege,” to mean?

**Reflective Questions**
- In what ways have you benefitted from the way that society is organized?
- Do you think that those benefits are fair, or unfair?
- Think back to what you said you felt fortunate to have in your life. How would your life be different if you didn’t have that thing in your life?
- How would your life be different if you weren’t privileged in other ways that you are?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

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**4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION**

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are several texts—from the Bible, from 18th c. Germany, and from contemporary times—to consider. You need not discuss all of the texts; feel free to choose those that speak to you. These texts are merely tools for reflecting
on your own stories and experiences. Please use them in a way that organically continues or deepens the conversation you have been having so far.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I Adonai am your God.
--Leviticus 19:9-10

- How does this text regard wealth? Ownership?
- What assumptions does this text make about the relationship between those with and those without economic privilege?
- Are there differences in how this text regards ownership and how contemporary American culture does? If so, what?

Take care lest you forget Adonai your God and fail to keep God’s commandments, God’s rules, and God’s laws, which I enjoin upon you today. When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget Adonai your God, who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its seraph serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your ancestors had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." Remember that it is Adonai your God who gives you the power to get wealth, in fulfillment of the covenant that God made on oath with your ancestors, as is still the case.
--Deuteronomy 8:11-19

- What is this text’s concern about the Israelites becoming privileged?
• In what ways do people today erroneously believe that they prosper because of their own “power and might”?
• How does remembering history impact our understanding of social privileges today?

Will such be the fast I will choose, a day of a person’s afflicting his soul? Is it to bend his head like a fishhook and spread out sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast and an acceptable day to Adonai? Is this not the fast I will choose? To undo the fetters of wickedness, to untie the bands of perverseness, and to let out the oppressed free, and all perverseness you shall eliminate. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and moaning poor you shall bring home; when you see a naked one, you shall clothe him, and from your flesh you shall not hide. Then your light shall break forth as the dawn, and your healing shall quickly sprout, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of Adonai shall gather you in.

--Isaiah 58:5-8

• What kind of penitent fast does Isaiah object to? What does he think the agenda of the person fasting is?
• What kind of ‘fast’ does Isaiah prefer?
• What kind of impact does this kind of fast have on the oppressed? On the privileged?
• What would this kind of ‘fast’ look like if performed today, in our local community and in today’s complex, global world? Feel free to use concrete examples.
• Does Isaiah’s call feel invigorating? Intimidating? Something else?

A Jew who has power/authority (adam chashuv) has the obligation to rescue the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor by all means available to him, whether by direct action or through political effort, regardless of whether the oppressed is Jewish. So Job praised himself by saying “I have broken the teeth of evil”, and the Torah says of Moses that “He arose and championed them”, referring to the daughters of Jethro, even though they were the daughters of an idolatrous priest . . .

--Ya’akov Emden, She’elat Ya’betz

• How does Emden regard the responsibility of those with power?
• What might this responsibility look like in today’s world?
• Can a person be an *adam chashuv* in some ways but not others? If so, what might that look like?
• When are you an *adam chashuv*?
• What is an *adam chashuv*’s responsibility in the face of not only cases of witnessing direct oppression, but in a society that’s unequal in many ways?

But mishpat alone cannot create a good society. To it must be added tzedakah, distributive justice. One can imagine a society which fastidiously observes the rule of law, and yet contains so much inequality that wealth is concentrated into the hands of the few, and many are left without the most basic requirements of a dignified existence. There may be high unemployment and widespread poverty. Some may live in palaces while others go homeless. That is not the kind of order that the Torah contemplates. There must be justice not only in how the law is applied, but also in how the means of existence – wealth as God’s blessing – are distributed. That is tzedakah.

Tzedakah cannot be translated because it joins together two concepts that in other languages are opposites, namely charity and justice. Suppose, for example, that I give someone $100. Either he is entitled to it, or he is not. If he is, then my act is a form of justice. If he is not, it is an act of charity. In English (as with the Latin terms caritas and justitia) a gesture of charity cannot be an act of justice, nor can an act of justice be described as charity. Tzedakah is therefore an unusual term, because it means both. It arises from the theology of Judaism, which insists on the difference between possession and ownership. Ultimately, all things are owned by God, creator of the world. What we possess, we do not own – we merely hold it in trust for God. The clearest example is the provision in Leviticus: “The land must not be sold permanently because the land is Mine; you are merely strangers and temporary residents in relation to Me” (Leviticus 25:23).

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Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

• How does Sacks define “tzedekah”?
• What, in his view, is “the kind of order that the Torah contemplates”?
• How does his definition relate to economic privilege? How might it relate to other forms of privilege (in regards to race, gender, ability, and so forth)?
• How does living the values of tzedekah look on the ground? How does it look beyond donating money?
• In what ways do you live out the principle of tzedekah in your own life? In what ways do you feel challenged to?

5. **DO**

As Terry Smith, a high school social studies teacher and activist once said, “If we inherit injustice, we should never feel guilty. We are not responsible for that past. However, if we choose to do nothing about it going forward, then we have plenty to feel guilty about.” We are all lucky to have certain advantages in our lives. We should absolutely be grateful for the
fortune that we have, and being aware of it gives us the opportunity to decide what that good fortune enables us to do.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Feel free to use the space below to note your response to these questions.

Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.

Central Synagogue works tirelessly toward a world in which Judaism is central to the lives of Jews everywhere and is a profound and positive force for humanity. We are relentless in our pursuit of that goal — constantly evolving and always seeking new ways to be “more excellent.” We reach far beyond the walls of our synagogue to learn, worship, serve, and continually redefine what it means to be Jewish today.

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