

CHECKING OUR PRIVILEGE

HOW DOES STRUCTURAL RACISM AFFECT US, AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT IT?

OPENING QUESTION:

When is the last time your race affected how you were treated, for better or for worse?

OR

When did you first become aware of your race or ethnicity?

FROM OUR TRADITION:

Consider the following text, from the book of Deuteronomy:

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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What concern does this text express about the potential effects of wealth and wellbeing on the Israelites?
- (b) In what ways do people today believe that they prosper because of their own "power and might," when they instead owe their success to other factors?
- (c) To what extent do you attribute the advantages you enjoy to your own efforts? Are there factors other than those efforts that have contributed to these advantages?
- (d) How does remembering history impact our understanding of social privileges today? Do you think a history of oppression alters how we should think about issues of social privilege?

TORAH THROUGH A MODERN LENS:

This section refers to an article by Rabbi Sharon Brous entitled, “Why Jews Should Support Reparations for Slavery, which is available here: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-brous-reparations-slavery-jews-holocaust-20180307-story.html> . If the article was not distributed prior to this discussion, please take a few minutes to read it now.

At the beginning of her article, Rabbi Brous refers to a debate in the Talmud about what to do if a palace is built using a stolen beam. (You can find the original text, in Talmud Bavli, Gittin 55a, [here](#)). She writes:

One rabbi, Shammai, argues that the whole structure must be torn down, the beam retrieved and returned to its rightful owner. No home can flourish on a foundation built illegally and immorally. Another rabbi, Hillel, offers a different take: What sense does it make to demolish it? Let the thief pay for the beam, considering its full value as the foundation of what is now a beautiful home. Neither argues that you can pretend, year after year, generation after generation, that the beam wasn't stolen. Neither suggests that time rights the wrong. Both understand that the theft, unaddressed, threatens the legitimacy of the whole enterprise. Something must be done to rectify the original injury.

Our country was built on a stolen beam. More accurately, several million stolen beams. Only they weren't beams. They were human beings. The palace they built was magnificent, but they have never been compensated for their labor.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Rabbi Brous likens the structural racial inequality we continue to see in our country to the palace built on a stolen beam. What do you think of this metaphor? If it is persuasive to you, what rights and obligations does that imply?
- (b) Where do you see structural racial inequalities today? How if at all do they affect you, for better or for worse?
- (c) Later in the article, Rabbi Brous writes: “As survivors of generational trauma and beneficiaries of reparations granted after the Holocaust, Jews have a special obligation to help advance [the conversation about reparations].” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- (d) Rabbi Brous calls on us to exercise “moral imagination” in order to bring us closer to a reconciliation on race. What does that mean to you? Where have you seen examples of moral imagination? How could the Jewish community better use its moral imagination?

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE:

The following text is taken from the Union for Reform Judaism's "Audacious Hospitality Jews of Color Resource Manual, which is available here: <https://urjyouth.wufoo.com/forms/r1rmszqu1958wmy/>.

Reconsidering Being "Colorblind"

"To overcome racism, one must first take race into account."

-Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun

In North America, after the Civil Rights movement, most Americans understood that racism was "bad," but that didn't mean that there was an authentic commitment to fully change the institutions and ideologies throughout our society that uphold and perpetuate racism. These systems account for drastic social and economic inequality for people of color, particularly African Americans who had been the target of racist public policy and social system for hundreds of years. Setting up a simplistic ideology that "Racism is bad" rather than a complex understanding about how racism pervades our social structure has led to a common practice among white people: pushing away the idea that they participate in or benefit from racist systems, consciously or unconsciously. Without letting go of this practice, it is a challenge to choose to understand those systems and their impact on the lives of people of color, which is essential in order to participate in social change. In creating fully welcoming communities, it is important that we are able to have open conversations about race in our congregations, camps, and classrooms, but the impact of racial colorblind ideology can be an obstacle of which we may not even be aware. Racial colorblindness is based on a false binary between people who are racist, the "bad people," and those who are not, the "good people." This makes conversations that address the existence of racism in our preconceived ideas and institutions difficult and sometimes nearly impossible without eliciting a defensive response. This defensiveness makes it difficult to listen to and understand the lived experiences of people of color, and to ultimately address the issues and make real change.

Here Are Some Common Phrases that Fit into the Binary of "Good" and "Bad" Around Race

- "I was taught to treat everyone the same, so I'm not a racist."
- "I see people as individuals. I don't care if you are green, blue, or polka dotted."
- "Racism is in the past."
- "Everyone struggles, but if you work hard..."
- "My parents were/were not racist, so I am not."
- "I work in a diverse environment, so I'm not racist."
- "I have a person of color in my family, so I'm not racist."
- "I don't see color, I just see people."

- “My children are so much more open.”
- “I already know all about racism. I don’t need to have this conversation.”

This binary of good and bad can lead us to think that the way to address the problem is to never talk about it and to choose to believe it does not exist. Some believe that addressing racism is the problem. There is often an equating of all racism with white separatist and extremist groups, such as the KKK, Nazis, or skinheads whose active racist behaviors and ideologies are overt. Some reject racism because they don’t identify themselves by stereotypes of racists as mean, or old fashioned, or Southern. These views allow us to ignore the pervasive racism that is subtle, institutionalized, accepted, and subconscious, and which exists in all of the social institutions in which we participate. Beverly Tatum, president of Spelman College, talks of the racism embedded in our cultural messages as “smog in the air,” noting that “we don’t breathe it because we like it. We don’t breathe it because we think it’s good for us. We breathe it because it’s the only air that’s available.” In order to make change, we need to recognize that it exists and take action.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do the “common phrases” listed above seem familiar to you? Have you used them? Heard loved ones use them? How does it feel to be told that these phrases are ones to avoid?
- (b) If you identify as white, and someone were to “call you out” for saying or doing something “racist,” how would you react? Why? How would you hope to react?
- (c) What do you identify as some of the “smog in the air” that surrounds us when it comes to race and racism? How are you implicated in the system of structural racism in America?

TAKING ACTION

The Union for Reform Judaism, in its *Jews of Color Resource Manual*, offers the following suggestions for how we can act:

1. Develop a habit and practice of pushing past your discomfort in talking about race.
2. With children, start naming and identifying race in descriptions of the world around them. Adults can say, “Look, here’s a picture of a little girl. She has pale skin. We call that ‘white.’ This little girl has brown skin. She might call herself ‘black’ or ‘African American.’”
3. With children, make race a part of your discussions of “fairness,” and teach them to take action when they hear or see something unfair.
4. Don’t ignore images or messages you find unacceptable or stereotypical, or your own biases or prejudices. Talk them out with your family, peers, and children.
5. Attend a diverse range of cultural events.

6. Learn African-American, Latinx, and Asian-American history and choose books for your children and

yourself that include diverse characters and historical stories that include positive depictions of people ofcolor.

7. Learn about your own community and its current and past history around race. What laws created the inequality that persists in our neighborhoods, cities, state, and country? Learn what people who are most impacted are doing to solve these problems and support their actions towards a solution.

Here Are Actions We Can Take in Our Jewish Congregations, Teen Programs,

Schools and Camps

1. Listen to the voices of the Jews of Color in our community and their experiences of racism. Be willing to listen. Be willing to believe them.

2. Be brave in supporting conversations about how to make our congregation more welcoming and safe for Jews of Color.

3. Make sure the libraries and classrooms include books, resources, and images that feature Jews of Color and address diversity and race.

4. Create opportunities and events for members and participants to talk about race and inequality in our communities.

5. Join the RAC and other social justice organizations working to create more justice and equity.

6. Complete the Congregational Reflection in the Audacious Hospitality Pilot Toolkit. Take action in the areas where your congregation can improve.

7. Provide opportunities for staff to participate in professional development focused on cultural competency and inclusion.

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES:

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. (Memoir exploring the existence and effects of systemic racism in America).

Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (Explores resistance of Whites in America to engaging in discussion about race and racism).

Union for Reform Judaism, *Audacious Hospitality Toolkit*:

<https://urj.org/audacioushospitality/audacious-hospitality-toolkit> .

Religious Action Center, Civil Rights Resources: <https://rac.org/racial-justice> .