

White and Jewish

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5780/2019

Shana Tova!

During my preparation for these Days of Awe services, many precious memories about my time here in Ithaca came to mind. One such memory is of my very first year at TVO. Diana Levy invited me to meet with Marcia Fort, now Marcia Baum, then the director of GIAC (Greater Ithaca Activities Center), to talk about GIAC and anti-racism work in Ithaca. I remember sitting around the table in Diana's kitchen with Marcia, Roberta Wallitt and Margo Hittleman, as we explored ways in which TVO and I could be more involved in local anti-racist work. Around the same time, Tony Gaenslen and Annie Wexler introduced me to Dorothy Cotton.

As I think about the years that I have spent with you, I feel profound gratitude to the congregation for introducing me to leaders of the African American community in Ithaca and for your commitment to local activism to dismantle racism. Through my connection with you, with the Dorothy Cotton Institute, and other activists in the Ithaca community, I have learned so much about myself, about my own racism and about the history of racism. I have still so much more to learn and to unlearn. My sermon today, reflecting on what it means to be white and Jewish, is an offering of gratitude to you all and to this incredible congregation.

This Rosh Hashanah, with the resurgence of white supremacy and white nationalism at the very center of our national life, with a president who Ta-Nehisi Coates has appropriately called, the "First White President," I want to explore the issue of "whiteness." This discussion feels urgent and necessary.

What does it mean to be a white person in a society of white supremacy? What is "whiteness" about?

What is the experience of being white and Jewish? What is the relationship between these two identities?

Discomfort

For many liberal or progressive whites, the very acknowledgement of whiteness is profoundly uncomfortable. We may feel that to be labelled as a white person is itself to be called a racist. We may say to ourselves, I am a white person who opposes all forms racism and discrimination. Or, I am Jewish and Jews aren't whites. All these responses are common reflections of the discomfort. I want to explore this discomfort.

By focusing on the experience of white Jews, I want to be careful not to reinforce the assumption by many American Jews that all Jews are white. While the majority of American Jews are white, Jews are not all white. **Jews are a multiracial people.** This erasure of Jews of color both in the American Jewish community and the global Jewish community, sometimes termed Ashkenazi normativity, is deeply painful to Jews of Color in the United States and around the world.

We, at Tikkun v'Or, are a multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Temple/Jewish congregation. Our membership reflects both the high percentage of American Jews who are white and the growing diversity of our community in different ways.

For those members who are people of color, or people of other religions or ethnicities, I hope this exploration in no way offends or hurts you. My hope is that it may bring all of us to a deeper understanding of how white supremacy affects us all and how we may support one another in responding to this reality in a way that helps to dismantle racism and racial privilege.

I want to start with my personal story.

Part 1: South Africa

The life of a white person in any society based on white supremacy, gives whites advantages in every aspect of their lives from birth to death. While the level of privilege will vary, by definition **white supremacy is a system that privileges white people.** This was true for me in South Africa and it has been equally true for me in the United States.

I was born in Apartheid South Africa in 1952, seven years after the end of the second world war into a white, very committed Jewish family and community in Cape Town, South Africa. As you all well know, from a young age, I loved and cared deeply about Judaism and Jewish life and it has always been the center of my life.

It was clear to me from a very early age that I was born into racial privilege. All the people of color I encountered in my life were in a subservient position, from the full time domestic servant in our home, to the workers in my father's store, to the cleaning staff in my Jewish school and synagogue, to the barefoot kids with tattered clothes who sold us newspapers as we stopped at a traffic light and begged us for a little money or food. It was clear as daylight that their lives were fundamentally different from mine. And, it was clear to me even as a child that my situation and theirs were related to one another.

Ethical Judaism

In my Jewish day school, I learned that the God of the Jewish people was the God of liberation, the God who took us out of the Land of Egypt and demanded equality, freedom and dignity for all. Ethics was at the core of my Judaism.

I also grew up with many reminders of the painful experience of the Holocaust and the oppression of Jews at different times in history. My father, a Jewish communal leader, talked often about the Holocaust and the silence of others, including Christian religious leaders, during this catastrophe for our people.

As a young person and young adult, I rebelled against the way my father's generation spoke about the Holocaust but was silent about Apartheid. My Judaism and Jewish identity was a critique of the racist white society in which I grew up. I was ashamed to be a white South African and proud to be a Jew - a pride lessened by the failure of almost all the adults, teachers and rabbis in my community to challenge the brutal racist system that made our lives so very comfortable, while millions of black and brown people literally didn't have enough to eat. We thought of ourselves as liberals, yet our silence on the issue of Apartheid was deafening.

There was much latent antisemitism in the white community. My parent's generation were afraid to challenge Apartheid. When I was in 10th grade, there were student protests at the University of Cape Town when the government overturned the appointment of a Black professor at the university. A disproportionate number of the leaders of the student protest were Jewish. The so-called Minister of Justice at the time publicly warned the Jewish communal leaders that they should make sure that their young people stop their activism. **The thinly veiled threat was that if they didn't silence their children, our status as whites and our access to all the privileges we enjoyed as whites, could be revoked.** Maybe our safety could also be in danger.

Part 2. The United States

In 1975, drawn by the integration of a spiritually compelling Judaism with a commitment to justice in some *havurot* and alternative *minyanim* in the Jewish counterculture of the 60's, and in search of a place, other than Israel, to study Judaism as a radical spiritual tradition, I immigrated to the United States. I have made my home on the edges of the progressive/liberal Jewish community since.

I was also inspired to come to the United States by the southern black freedom movement that I naively thought had overcome the racial inequality and discrimination in the United States. **I thought I was immigrating to a post-racial United States where people were judged not by the color of their skin but the nature of their character.**

Ever since my immigration some 45 years ago to the United States I have been unlearning this assumption about America then and now. **The more I learn, the greater similarity I see between my own experience as a white Jew in South Africa and the experience of white Jews in the United States, especially in the south but in the north as well.** And the differences that I noticed also surprised me. One striking difference that I noticed was that in South Africa the reality and ugliness of white supremacy was public, clear and in your face. I discovered that racism in the United States on the East Coast where I have lived, the ugly reality of white supremacy is covert and coded.

America: 7000 Lincoln Drive

For example, I will always remember the day when I discovered that 7000 Lincoln Drive, the apartment block where many of our dearest friends in the alternative minyan at the Germantown Jewish Center lived, did not rent to people of color. I just couldn't believe it. Over a period of over a year not one of my friends had mentioned this fact. In South Africa, much like in the American South, racism was explicit, it was not hidden or coded. There may have been a disgusting "Whites Only" sign or a law making it a white area. But here the racism was hidden, covert and therefore in some ways even more insidious.

Changing Neighborhood

I remember the first time someone asked me if Germantown was a "changing neighborhood." I thought it was just an innocent question and launched into a description of justice activism in the neighborhood. I didn't understand that the question was code for isn't it a dangerous neighborhood where blacks live.

The way in which racism is coded and underground in the United States makes it even harder to name, understand and, most importantly, to dismantle.

Many white Americans assume and often act as if racism is a thing of the past. Some talk about being color-blind personally and free from any bias, an impossibility for a white growing up in a racist society. Focussing on discreet individual acts of racism, and the fact that we personally do not engage in acts of racism in our lives or use racial slurs we assume we live in a meritocracy where any person regardless of his/her race is given equal opportunity. We assume incorrectly, that race no longer affects the advancement of any individual.

White Fragility and Systemic Racism

These false assumptions about race are at the heart of what Robin Diangelo calls “white fragility” how difficult it is for us as white people to talk about racism.¹ **What we ignore is that racism is not an event but it is a system that privileges the lives of white people and denies those same privileges to people of color. This is what racism is about and it is what being white is about.**

As a system, white supremacy ensures that whites will have access to better schools, better neighborhoods, better jobs, better medical care, better access for loans and mortgages and on and on. It is a system that ensures segregation where we live and where our children go to school even though there is abundant evidence that integrated neighborhoods and schools work better for everyone.

Wealth Gap

White supremacy works to benefit white people in all ways creating huge gaps between white and blacks. The wealth gap is one of the starkest. Nationally, the median white American family has 41 times more wealth than the median Black family and 22 times more wealth than the median Latino family!² In 2017 when the Spotlight team of the Boston Globe did a series on race focused on Boston, they reported that the household median net worth for whites was \$247,500 and \$8 for Blacks. Readers called the paper sure that it was a typo, but it wasn't!³

This huge wealth gap is the result of systemic legalized discrimination which over a period of three decades starting in the 1940's prevented black families from having a piece of the American dream of home ownership. This legalized discrimination was not only a result of the actions by individual realtors or homeowners. It was the Federal Housing Administration that instituted redlining by which neighborhoods were segregated and

¹ Diangelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why it is so hard for white people to talk about racism*. (Boston:Beacon Press, 2018).

² <https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/#racial-wealth-divide>

³ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/12/11/that-was-typo-the-median-net-worth-black-bostonians-really/ze5kxC1jJelx24M3pugFFN/story.html>

people of color were denied access to subsidized homes after the second world war. Also the fact that the GI bill was not applied equally to Black veterans, meant that many whites used their benefits to purchase homes while people of color were denied that option.

In his extraordinary article, the *Case for Reparations*,⁴ Ta- Nehisi Coates tells the heartbreaking story of Clyde Ross, a black man who grew up in Mississippi and migrated to Chicago. Every step of the way, he was cheated by unscrupulous white landowners, robbed of the opportunity to own a decent home in a decent neighborhood. If you haven't read this article, I strongly recommend it. It radically changed my understanding of racism as a system based on white supremacy that goes back to 1619 when the first slaves arrived in this country.

We, as white people and as Jews, often tell the story with great pride of the remarkable economic success of Jews in this country as if it had nothing to do with being white. Sometimes these conversations implicitly or explicitly compare the characteristics of Jewish and Black culture as if this may explain the different experiences of the two communities. The economic success of Jews and all whites is directly related to systemic racism. America is not a meritocracy where any individual can be economically successful.

The Conundrum of Whiteness

But for whites this is a very uncomfortable truth. In her brilliant New York Times op-ed piece entitled, "White Debt," Eula Biss refers to this as the "conundrum of whiteness."⁵ **I am attached to the comfort of what I have and uncomfortable with the way I came to have it."**

For many liberal white Americans, we are and probably should be uncomfortable **about the advantages that are the foundation of our very lives.** It is the fear that we will be called racist or made to feel guilty, that make us unable to talk about racism and that stands in the way of a full acknowledgement of our whiteness and the role it plays in our lives.

Eula Biss suggests that the condition white life could be described as "forgotten debt." The subtitle of her op-ed piece is "Reckoning with what is owed - and what can never be repaid for racial privilege." As whites, we have a debt "based on the the redlining, block busting, racial covenants, contract buying loan discrimination, housing projects, mass incarceration, predatory lending and deed thefts that have prevented so many black Americans from building wealth the way so many white Americans have through home ownership."

⁴ Coates, Ta-Hanisi. "The Case for Reparations." The Atlantic, June 2014

⁵ Biss, Eula White Debt, New York Times, December 2, 2015

What binds whites is not skin color, kinship or culture, it is that we share a system of social advantages that can be traced back to the advent of slavery in the colonies that became the United States.

How can we repay this debt? Are we willing to even acknowledge the debt, let alone repay it?

White and Jewish: Are Jews really white?

So far in my discussion about America I have focussed on systemic racism that has benefited all whites regardless of whether they are Irish, Italian, or Jewish. Yet there is an ongoing debate, even among progressive Jews, about whether Jews are white.

For example, in his book co authored with Professor Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*,⁶ Rabbi Michael Lerner argues that Jews are not white.

“To be white is to fit into the social construct of the beneficiaries of European imperialism.....Far from being the beneficiaries Jews have been the primary “other,” have been socially and legally discriminated against have been the subject of racism and genocide, and in those terms Jews are not white... And by calling Jews “white,” Blacks are in effect denying our history of oppression.”

Professor West responds, “How do you account for my thesis that Jews have been the beneficiaries of white skin privilege? ... Even amidst antisemitism, the anti-Black situation confers white-skin privilege on Jews”

Lerner then argues that the privileges only come with a psychic and cultural cost. To pass as whites, Jews must renounce the particularity of Jewish culture and Jewish religious practices.

West responds, “I still have to say that the choice to gain access to material prosperity even at the cost of one’s own identity was a choice the white supremacist country with its caste system would never make available to Black folk.”

It is true as Rabbi Lerner argues that in Christian Europe Jews were “other” but it is also true and that white Jews in the United States have prospered because of white privilege.

Jews were regarded as whites from the beginning of the United States. Even in the Slave Codes of the early eighteenth century Jews were regarded as whites and could own slaves

⁶ Lerner, Michael and West, Cornell. *Jews and Blacks: Let the healing begin*. New York, G.P.Putnam’s Sons, 1995, pages 66-70.

(but not white Christian servants) and Jews were regarded as whites by the 1790 Naturalization Act.

Jews also have suffered in the United States from antisemitism in the past and last night I talked about the violent antisemitism of the moment we are in. For a period of time from the end of the nineteenth century through the second world war, Jews suffered significant antisemitism, restrictions on immigration, access to certain neighborhoods and professions and quotas on admission to colleges.

In the post-war boom, many Jews became middle class and benefited greatly from programs that were denied to blacks. This was the period of redlining, the GI bill, and suburbanization.

I agree that we should never deny or downplay the history of antisemitism in the first half of the twentieth century or in the present, but we also shouldn't use antisemitism **to deny or downplay that Jews are and have been beneficiaries of white privilege that have shaped our lives.**

Over the past decade there are many whites, I am among them, whose eyes have been opened to the deep structural and systemic racism that has always been and still is the reality of American life.

Our eyes have been opened by the protests against the killing of blacks by police officers, by the Black Lives Matter movement, by the incredible writing of Michelle Alexander, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Charles Blow, Nicole Hana Brown, and others, that has helped many of us to understand the role of systemic racism in our lives.

My Judaism provides a counter vision to that of white supremacy. All the advantages I enjoy over people of color violate the moral principles of Judaism. And, I must acknowledge that these same advantages has shaped every part of my life. **My lifespan, my health, my education: the schools I attended starting at a very young age and throughout my life, my professional opportunities, my financial status have all been shaped by the racial advantages-seen and unseen- over people of color. Almost every part of my life is literally inconceivable without these privileges.** This is the uncomfortable truth for all white people in the United States - it is the "conundrum of whiteness."

Jewishness or Jewish suffering does not free us from the responsibility of doing a *cheshbon hanefesh*/ a soul reckoning and responding to the way we collude and participate in systemic racism that has benefited us and hurt people of color. Some of us may feel guilty.

My intention here this morning is not to induce guilt but rather to inspire deep reflection and teshuva. Teshuva means to respond, to act responsibly.

Teshuva: Possibilities for Action

There are many different ways to act responsibly, and as I said at the beginning, I have learned so much from many of you who have committed yourself to this task.

We can support the movement for reparations, which would be a national response of teshuva.

We can talk to one another about growing up white and how we can support one another to make choices and take actions that respond to the unfair advantages we enjoy in our everyday lives.

We can participate in multifaith, multi-racial, multiethnic coalitions dedicated to dismantling white supremacy and racism.

We can challenge idealized visions of the United States as a bastion of equality and justice from the beginning. We can teach a true history that fully acknowledges white supremacy.

We can interrupt or at least observe when whites act to Blacks in discriminatory, violent or cruel ways.

We can focus locally on our schools, supporting efforts at integration of schools and the elimination of disparities between white students and students of color.

We can support national Jewish organizations like Jews for Economic and Racial Justice.

Ultimately, we want to abolish the very concept of whiteness that only exists so as to oppress people of color.

I don't want to be on this team

I want to end with a story that Eula Biss tells about her son who brought home a book from the library about the slaves who built the White House. The book disturbed her son. "I don't want to be on this team," he said with his head in his hands. "You might be stuck on this team," she told him, "but you don't have to play by its rules."

At this frightening time of violent antisemitism connected to white supremacy, as Jews we can choose to be solidly part of a multiracial movement to undo white supremacy. That will involve both commitment and sacrifice. We can participate in multi-ethnic, multiracial and multi-faith coalition to inequities of the system from which we have benefited enormously. **Maybe we also don't have to play by its rules.**

If we do, we will be Jews in the deepest sense, inheritors of spiritual tradition that sees the image of God in each and every person and calls us to work for justice and equality for all.

Lastly, thank you all for guiding me on this journey. I am forever indebted to you for what you all have taught me.

In the coming year, may we move toward a country with justice and equality for all, may all be blessed with a year of a year of joy and blessing for all. Shana Tova