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Jew as Other?

When God asked Noah to build the ark, Noah agreed. And he built the ark. The rabbis call Noah a tzaddik in peltz – a righteous man in a fur coat. He was a good man and willingly accepting of or worse oblivious to his privilege.

When God told Abraham that the destruction of S'dom and G'morrah was about to happen, Abraham stood up and called God out – how can you be the God of justice and righteousness and not do justice!?

When God asked Noah to build the ark, Noah agreed. He was in a place of extreme privilege and power. The ONE guy who was going to be saved. How fortunate for him and his family. And so he built the ark with no questions to God. Sure he was righteous, that's why God wanted to save him. Noah was the one good guy in a wicked generation.

But Abraham ... he's the one who is our model of righteousness because, as the rabbis ask, is it harder to be righteous in a wicked generation or righteous in a good generation? Abraham's righteousness stands out because he was willing to question the Authority – as in literally the SUPREME Authority. And look at what happened. God backed down. TO A POINT. For the sake of ten righteous ones, God would not destroy the cities. Sadly, there were not even ten and indeed, the evil needed to be routed out. But it was not the end of the generation as was the case with the Flood. And it was not the end of evil as we well know. But it was a moment when God and Abraham reached an understanding.

We have to talk.

We have to negotiate.

We have to be honest.

We have to admit.

We have to use our power and privilege very carefully.

We have to ...

My hometown, as many of you know, is San Francisco. My family dates back there for five generations of Cohns who have been living in that city by the Bay. And I love that city and my hometown for so many reasons – not the least of which has to do with the city's being tolerant and open and expressive since its inception. It has to do with being in the West with social borders being more open due to its growth out of a rugged and pioneering spirit. Though the truth is – just how open and tolerant is it? I grew up in a largely white and privileged suburb of San Francisco. Ask people

how open and tolerant the city and its environs are and you might find different answers if you are in east Oakland versus Marin County, Haight-Ashbury or the Castro.

Recently, the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, Colin Kaepernick, decided to make a big statement about racial injustice and the need for our country to enter into real discussions, and he used the National Anthem as the vehicle to wake up our nation. I was initially very taken aback by the idea that anyone would sit down for the National Anthem. "It's disrespectful." I called out. "It's not the way or time to make a statement like that." I said with great judgment. "There have to be some customs that unite us as Americans." But look at what has come of his stance: PRECISELY what we need to do as a nation. Acknowledge that racism is a White person's problem and source of extreme tension to discuss, address, grow from and heal.

I answered the way I did because I am like Noah – knowing that the world is about to be destroyed and wearing my fur coat of White Privilege building an ark to protect myself. But I want to be far more like Abraham who knew he was in a place of power and privilege and used that opportunity to ask a question of Authority. Abraham would not question Kaepernick but rather wonder: Why is he sitting down? Why are far more blacks incarcerated than whites?

Kaepernick's actions (and those of many other athletes) are leading to a national discussion and I know a host of my colleagues are talking about it in synagogues across this great land of ours on this very day. I believe that statements need to be made about the racial injustices in our country. I have come to embrace Kaepernick taking a knee (an active gesture rather than just sitting) when I came to realize my own White-male-cisgender privileged attitude.

Indeed, I am far more afraid of people burning his jersey than I am of his using that moment to make a statement. Because if there are those who will burn his jersey, they will quite willingly do the same to our Talmud and our Torah and our people's flag of Israel. And if it takes a multi-racial quarterback to spark a discussion, then as when Rosa Parks sat in the front of the bus, it's time to listen and act.

Moreover, if we, who live with so much comfort, power and privilege, have failed to address what needs addressing – then who is being disrespectful?

It's time to be more like Abraham than like Noah: asking questions rather than just going about our daily business.

Today, we, as Whites – yes, and as Jews – are suffering a failure of consciousness because we don't even know how much power and privilege we have.

Recently, I had to fill out an identity form. When I go to fill out forms and they ask, "RACE" I always pause: unclear what to do. And so, I answer mainly by process of elimination.

I know I'm not Latino. And I'm not Black. I'm not Asian. I'm native-born American but I'm not capital 'N' Native American. Well, I guess I must be White (Caucasian). And I know enough to know that being Jewish is not a race. But it's the 'Other' category that is the one I feel I should or could check most authentically. Isn't it interesting that our patriarch, Abraham, is called "HaIvri" – the Hebrew, which derives from the word *ever* – meaning across – he came from the 'other' side in terms of his beliefs, his practices, his God. Again, that is what sets him apart from the rest of his generation and indeed, Noah.

And so by default, I check White (Caucasian) – a designation determined by a German philosopher (Christoph Meiners) in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century who saw races as belonging to two classes: Caucasians and Mongolians. The Caucasians, he deemed superior because of fairer skin color and evidently having some kind of moral superiority as well. Not surprisingly, he later broke the Caucasians into subgroups, with Germans coming out on top as the ideal.

So the fact that I check white makes sense based on my skin color – but the challenge, the tension, the reality is my embracing what that means. It is worthy of note that my being Caucasian is probably not the kind of ancestry Meiners is talking about and never in my life have I considered myself European.

I'm Ashkenazi. Yes, I know – Ashkenazim come from central and eastern Europe (my family's origins before California) but in my life, I've never thought of myself as European.

For those of us who are White and Jewish, in America, go ahead and check 'White' on that Race Box. We owe this to people of color first off. And ask a Jew of color what box s/he checks and notice how different their experience is in this country as a result of their skin color.

So where does our struggle come in? Erroneously, at times, we think of ourselves exclusively as a religion. But we know we aren't 'just' a religion. We are a living people (Am Yisrael chai!). We have a nation (Israel). We are an ethnic group (broken into all kinds of subgroups). And we are a cultural group (eating bagels, listening to

Klezmer music, and writing comedy shows and serving on the boards of every social justice campaign in North America).

Let's face it: As American Jews we are confused and we have been through a lot in the last 200+ years. And when it comes to race, we don't even know how confused we are. One of my teachers and friends, Marc Dollinger, who is a professor of Jewish studies at San Francisco State University, said at a recent seminar I attended, "Today is an engagement in a failure of consciousness." Consciousness is being aware and awake to the reality around us and within us.

Marc said as follows (and I am paraphrasing): The Declaration of Independence confused us all. In the years that followed the Enlightenment, in western Europe and North America, we celebrated natural rights theory, which advocated: Life, liberty & property. (My beloved Thomas Jefferson changed the wording to 'pursuit of happiness'). Natural rights theory afforded Jews equality before the law, which was a FIRST for us in history while under a foreign ruler. But natural rights theory was not about the Jews. It was about others – whites. But if we were 'just' a religion, then we could be whites. And the Declaration of Independence and corresponding concepts and laws in the US and western Europe gave us a chance to start to think about Judaism as 'just' a religion. It was a stark contrast to the 1,000 year history of ghettoization and anti-Semitism of Europe, famously illustrated by Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, as Shakespeare's paradigmatic Jew struggled with being accepted to do business with those in power but was still seen as the other:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

But in the United States a different future was being laid out. We were confused on these new shores because the Declaration of Independence was written to be UNIVERSALISTIC. And we Jews, at times are highly PARTICULARISTIC. And had been treated that way through history.

Bottom line: By the late 1700s, the brand new United States having adopted the Constitution, bifurcated our identities. Suddenly: My religion is Jewish. My nation is America. And clearly we still struggle with this. Note the two flags on the bima.

The Constitution and our being folded into this new nation was a challenge for the Jewish world. It was great for America, where we would all unite as citizens. But for Jews, it has been and remains a source of confusion, whether we fully realize it or

not. American Jews have so internalized the bifurcation – we are not comfortable bringing them together – hence why we so fully embrace the idea of separating church & state.

Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice and also ardent Zionist and proud American brought this bifurcation of religious and national identity together by stating that you may be patriotic Americans while being strong Zionists simultaneously. In celebrating the idea that different groups in America could maintain their uniqueness while holding on to those ideas America stands for, he wrote:

“Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with Patriotism. Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent. A man is a better citizen of the United States for being also a loyal citizen of his state, and of his city; for being loyal to his family, and to his profession or trade; for being loyal to his college or his lodge. Every Irish American who contributed towards advancing home rule was a better man and a better American for the sacrifice he made. Every American Jew who aids in advancing the Jewish settlement in Palestine, though he feels that neither he nor his descendants will ever live there, will likewise be a better man and a better American for doing so.” Indeed, “there is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry...”

<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/204852/why-zionism-is-americanism>

But I’m still confused when I check that Race Box because American isn’t a race and Jewish isn’t either. So maybe I’m denying something greater or just avoiding something I don’t see or take for granted. Or worse – I’m not realizing that to choose ... simply to have the choice is ALREADY a luxury – a moment of White Privilege. Because I can feel as Other ... as Jew. But I can hide as a White just by taking off my kippah. I go through my day and surely have privilege that I don’t even realize I’m so immune to it and so surrounded by it. Being white is simply a biological designation but being white brings along, in this country at least (and dare I say in many others – including our beloved Israel), tremendous power and privilege. From how much I get paid when I graduate college to how I get treated in the bank or at the car dealer, from not being followed when I walk around the shopping mall to having never been pulled over for driving while Black.

And talk about privilege – I’m not only white but I’m a male. And not only am I a male but I’m cisgender – a term I only recently learned, meaning the opposite of transgender – it means: I identify with the gender I was born with. I mean – at least the Race box leaves the option for an “Other” line ... the Gender box is either: M or F.

Privilege. We who are clearly in a position of power take it for granted. Blindly. Like Noah. And we need to recognize it and consider Abraham's model and ask the question – is this right? Where is the justice? We may ask it of God – but we need to ask it of ourselves and our communities and our places and people in positions of power. I sent this sermon out to several colleagues and community members across town to review. One community member said: I think that one of the great drawbacks of privilege of any kind is that it supports a self-concept that denies the need for self doubt and introspection.” This is a moment for us, who live with white privilege, to do some serious introspection and self-doubt.

It's funny. Or not. When I first heard that the San Francisco 49ers QB sat out for the National Anthem, I didn't know his name or his skin color. I had no idea. Did you know that out of 16 great grandparents, if you have 15 from Italy, you are Italian, correct? And if you have 1 from Africa – you are black.

Colin Kaepernick – born to a white mother and an African-American father – given up for adoption and raised by two white parents.

So ... what is he?

Human. Multi-racial.

What box does he check?

And what does it matter on these forms anyway?

Why do we even have boxes?

Clearly I'm white because my 16 grandparents were but in their day ... they didn't experience the Whiteness with which I live. Many are the Jews who were kept out of jobs and social clubs and housing and countless opportunities because they were not seen as white.

What happened? Jews gained power in the years that followed the Second World War. But we never stopped being Jews – we just began to become less a people and more of a religion. In the acceptance by the greater society, we could finally leave the old world for the new one – and the world around us began to see us as human rather than as the 'other' ...

And now we/I have the chutzpah to be confused? Are we, am I, white or not white?

Zoom into today with the BDS movement and you have Jews perceived as white who want to maintain status quo – namely, NOT boycott, divest and sanction Israel. There are strong voices, often from communities of color, who want to change University policies vis a vis Israel and course curriculum to present the Israeli-

Palestinian Conflict portraying Israel as the oppressor. And along comes the Movement for Black Lives statement this summer that applied words like 'genocide' and 'apartheid' to Israel and the Palestinians and although many of us have supported so many of the efforts to address racial injustice in this country, and the horrible atrocities committed against people of color by a Justice system that lacks Justice all too often, suddenly we are not sure if we are Black or White or a people or a religion or fighters for social justice or maintainers of the status quo or to whom we belong and who are our friends and ... I just needed to fill out a form and they asked me what my Race is.

Before 1967, namely the 6-Day War, Jews were perceived as a people of color – certainly not White. Israel was seen as oppressed and persecuted as the David in the David and Goliath story. The Holocaust was still fresh on everyone's minds (as well it should remain) but we remained as we had been for so long: Other. It's why during the Civil Rights marches in the 60s, we could stand, as Whites yes, but as Jews along with our Black neighbors because we understood. The clubs and the law firms and the hospitals and the hotels had signs and policies: NO JEWS, NO BLACKS, NO DOGS allowed. But the Blacks and Jews – we were together because others had put us together. And the Black story of Slavery was our story and the Blacks knew our story and we understood their story and their suffering.

But after 1967 and the 6-Day War, the Palestinians become perceived as the other and Jews as the whites or as the ones in a place of power. And Jews were purged from Civil Rights groups post 1967 and Jews decided to move out of cities and into neighborhoods where earlier they had been refused entry. Jews moved out into suburbs and at times didn't speak out when home owner associations excluded people of color. And Black was Beautiful and Move over Whitey included the white Jewish guy next to you at the rally and Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney were slowly, sadly ... forgotten.

And the coalitions broke down.

Today: American Jews are left with two competing truths. One: We are a people who suffered an attempted genocide recently and there are powers afoot that would not mind furthering that effort that already took one third of our people. Two: We have achieved more access to power than we have had any time anywhere. What I didn't mention was where I heard my friend give his lecture. I was sitting in the heart of Washington, DC at a rabbinic seminar held by AIPAC. DC – the epitome of Whiteness and Privilege and AIPAC – the definition of the Jews' voice in the corridors of influence from Pennsylvania Avenue to Capitol Hill.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, in his discussing the Ethics of Jewish Power, explained that the moral purity of victims is often a function of the fact that they have no power to afflict evil. (repeat) This is the story of Jews until 1948. But afterwards, there has been a total turn in the moral situation. The existence of the State of Israel – and the concurrent challenges of being what is perceived as an Occupying Power flips our former relationship to power and privilege. And today, for many Israelis and supporters of Israel (I believe the majority), there is no other morally tolerable choice – the alternative to maintaining power is death and that is a central lesson the Jews learned in the Holocaust.

Concurrently, the American Jewish story has exchanged our otherness for power and privilege. Jews are largely white and certainly no longer widely perceived as the Other. In fact, Jews have traded, in many ways, culture for privilege. Whereas our cultural heritage gave us tribal and/or group unity, in embracing Whiteness, we have lost cohesion and found ourselves far more White than Jewish – holidays, customs, traditions are not nearly as well-known or practiced by assimilated Jews as once before. So too, we find our Jewish children in places heretofore reserved for whites ... but at what cost?

We know that “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” (John Dalberg-Acton, 19<sup>th</sup> century English historian.) But power can distract us from our focus on our core values.

Jews are in positions of power and have ready access to power. The question becomes twofold. 1. Must we eliminate our Jewishness while admitting our whiteness? 2. Accepting that we have power and privilege: How do we deploy it!?!? The first question is for us one of Jewish identity and continuity. That is an inward looking question for a different sermon and may well show up on Yom Kippur. The second question is urgent in light of today’s world that demands our attention. We must deploy our power and we cannot allow suffering in silence. The Torah very clearly commands us to understand the plight of the stranger and the foreigner, the one who is on the margins and the one who is enslaved by an oppressive power because we were slaves, we have lived in the shadows and on the margins, and we have been foreigners. We are commanded to pursue justice and therefore cannot remain silent – ever. Neither on matters related to Israel’s security nor on matters of racial injustice to people of color in our cities. We will not be silent in the face of 500,000 dead and 10 million homeless as a result of atrocities in Syria. We will not be silent when our State Legislators and Governor target the Transgender Community and make discrimination legal based on sexual orientation. We will not be silent when political candidates paint immigrants or Muslims as less than human and in need of being shipped back or excluded or harmed. And we will certainly not be silent when those political candidates fuel fires of racism, bigotry, hatred, sexism,

xenophobia and prejudice. And we will not be silent when we see a statement come out that calls Israel an Apartheid State but rather try to enter into honest discussion with our friends and neighbors so we can hear their story and narrative and share ours as well.

So whether there is violence in Charlotte or east Jerusalem, Baltimore or Jenin – although there are very different reasons for the violence, when we enter into those conversations about race relations here and violence there, we must remember that we are perceived as white, and in a position of power, and the notion that we would NOT see ourselves as white would be perceived by many as offensive. Though my struggle for identity clarification is real, my choice of what Race box to check is a choice of privilege. And for me to deny my being white would be seen as disingenuous by my Black neighbors who very much see me as White.

There is the Talmudic teaching: All of Israel is responsible for each other. That teaching has kept our people alive. But so too, as circumstances change for us in the world that has increasingly accepted us and allowed, caused, enabled us to become white, we ought to reach our hands out wider to recognize our accountability and responsibility in a world that is desperately in need of justice, fairness, equity and balance (we call that tzedek) – to become the righteous ones (tzaddikim) for whom Abraham argued with God.

May we create a world that is, indeed, worth saving. And may we create a world where we work for blessing (beracha) and safety (bitachon) and justice (tzedek) and life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all our neighbors.