

Jews and Racial Privilege

DISCLAIMER: Not all Jews are white!

Song of Songs, ch 1

ה שחורה אני ונאווה, בנות ירושלים;
באגלי קדר, פיריעות שלמה.
5 I am black and/but beautiful, O daughters of
Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of
Solomon.

Jews of color make up the majority of Jews in the world, as well as in Israel, but are largely invisible and exploited both here and in Israel.

-Paul Kivel "I'm Not White, I'm Jewish: Standing as Jews in the Fight for Racial Justice"

Rabbi Susan Talve, St. Louis, in response to Ferguson (truah.org/index.php)

[W]hat can Jews dedicated to justice do? ... Explode the myth that Jews are white people living in the suburbs. We have many black members with black sons scared for their lives. One of my bar mitzvah and confirmation students is a very tall 16 year old who is black and lives in Ferguson. No school for another week. He is scared to leave his apartment. This is personal. It is about us.

Organizations that explicitly include and seek to serve Jews that aren't white—
bechollashon.org
jewsinallhues.org/
jewishmultiracialnetwork.org/

The following statements are examples of ways in which white Ashkenazi Jews have privilege because they are white. The privileges listed below are ones that many white Ashkenazi Jews may take for granted today, but which are not available to most Jews of color in the United States.

___ I can walk into my temple and feel that others do not see me as outsider and/or exotic

___ I can walk into my temple and feel that my children are seen as Jews.

___ I can walk into temple with my family and not worry that they will be treated unkindly because of the color of their skin.

-<http://kehilamagazineofficial.wordpress.com/why-kehila/ashkenaziwhite-jewish-privilege-checklist/>

WHAT IS WHITE PRIVILEGE?

Naomi Zack (*professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon*):

The term “white privilege” is misleading. A privilege is special treatment that goes beyond a right. It’s not so much that being white confers privilege but that not being white means being without rights in many cases.

Not fearing that the police will kill your child for no reason isn’t a privilege. It’s a right. But I think that is what “white privilege” is meant to convey, that whites don’t have many of the worries nonwhites, especially blacks, do. I was talking to a white friend of mine earlier today. He has always lived in the New York City area. He couldn’t see how the Michael Brown case had anything to do with him. I guess that would be an example of white privilege.

Other examples of white privilege include all of the ways that whites are unlikely to end up in prison for some of the same things blacks do, not having to worry about skin-color bias, not having to worry about being pulled over by the police while driving or stopped and frisked while walking in predominantly white neighborhoods, having more family wealth because your parents and other forebears were not subject to Jim Crow and slavery. Probably all of the ways in which whites are better off than blacks in our society are forms of white privilege.

-http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/05/what-white-privilege-really-means/?_r=0

Sarah Barasch-Hagans, rabbinical student from St. Louis

History has cruelly prepared us for this moment, and history calls us to account in real and tangible ways. We, as Jews, are all too familiar with what it means to fear a powerful police force who seems to see us as the enemy. We are all too familiar with being portrayed by society as villains to be scapegoated and misunderstood. We know what it means to not be able to protect our own children from danger and even death. Simply put, we know what it means to yearn for safety. We ought to recognize the same yearning — and its cousin, despair — when it is in our own backyard.

-<http://jewishexponent.com/opinion/2014/10/a-rabbi-returns-home-as-eyewitness-to-ferguson>

Do Jews have white privilege? If so, what is the nature of that privilege?

If so, what about the persecution of Jews?

What should Jews do with their privilege?

What’s the role of Jewish tradition and/or community/culture etc.?

Samuel G. Freedman

As a college freshman, [Princeton student Tal] Fortgang necessarily lacks the perspective to see that his family's history, indeed Jewish history, is a saga of both persecution and achievement, of being both underdog and overdog. He clutches the memory of loss and struggle. He does not seem to accept the existence of inherited advantage.

...We [Jews] are now the ones with trust funds, family foundations, legacy admission to elite universities. It is not that we don't work hard, but we start work with a foundation of benefits earned not by ourselves but by our forebears.

So if you are able to grow up in New Rochelle, and if you are able to attend the S.A.R. day-school, both of which Fortgang did, and if just maybe you also had tutoring or test-prep classes, and at the least had the proximate example of college-educated parents, none of that means you did not toil. It just meant you started your toil with assets not available to the children of less prosperous, less educated families.

How, then, can we live as Jews in modern America with an honest admission that we are both Samson and the nebbish, the mighty and the vulnerable, the comfortable offspring of a hated, hunted people? ... The answer turned up in the Torah portion Behar, which was read last Shabbat.

In the text, the ancient Israelites are commanded to practice a sabbatical from farming every seventh year and a jubilee year with every seventh sabbatical. One major purpose of the *shmita*, as it's known, is to permit the poor to harvest food from the untended fields. Another passage of the portion insists that any Jew who has been forced by poverty to mortgage his land not be expelled from it....

The text does not tell us there is anything wrong with possessing privilege, in the ancient form of land and crops. Rather, it tells us that the purpose of such privilege: to share it in a spirit of generosity and humility.

-<http://forward.com/articles/198054/checking-your-jewish-privilege/>

Rabbi Susan Talve, St. Louis

Our job is to listen and get their [young black men and women organizing for economic and other forms of justice] backs and to use our influence to make room for them at the power tables. ...

Justice for Michael Brown is key for us. We need to use our connections and influence to make this as transparent a trial as possible.

We are bridge builders as grass tops. Be bold and use every connection you have to heal and the deep wounds.

Jay Michaelson

<http://forward.com/articles/204280/why-jews-should-care-about-ferguson/>

Why Jews Should Care About Ferguson

We're Part of the Oppressive System That Killed Michael Brown

...

A few decades ago, it would have been easy to add Jews to that list of disempowered victims. I could throw in Leo Frank, the victim of mob justice; or otherwise privileged Jewish men denied entrance to elite universities. These days, however, we have to search a lot harder.

There are still victims of anti-Semitism, of course — the shooting in Overland Park, Kansas, was only four months ago, and the recent pogroms in Europe have been chilling. But there is a crucial difference between these outbursts of anti-Semitic violence and those which marked an earlier era: in America and Europe, they are not part of the systems of power. It's not the rich and powerful who are spray-painting swastikas. On the contrary, it's those who perceive themselves to be marginalized.

This is an important distinction. Anti-Semitism is real, but it is no longer intrinsic to the systems of oppression that killed Michael Brown. Like it or not, then, most American Jews find ourselves on the side of privilege. We may be “off-white,” as some theorists have proposed, but we're close enough. If we stand up for the underdog, it will be out of ethics, not self-interest.

Yet this, too, is exactly what core Jewish traditions teach us. Yes, there are texts which speak of Jewish supremacy, of conquering everyone else, and of slavery, misogyny, and the rest. But exhortations of non-oppression of foreigners are more numerous: Leviticus 19:33-34, Deuteronomy 10:19, Deuteronomy 27:9, Jeremiah 22:3. The list goes on.

Most important, I think, is Exodus 22:21: “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.” Note the past tense. This is a text speaking to a people no longer victimized, but now with the power to victimize others. It is a text for our time.

...

as complex as the “system” is, the just response is simple. Oppress less. Do not conserve structures of oppression; work to counteract them. Choose the policies that favor the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Sure, it may not be clear which those policies are — but it should be clear which priorities are just.

... We will never complete this work. But at least we can stand on the right side of history.

Paul Kivel

“I’m Not White, I’m Jewish: Standing as Jews in the Fight for Racial Justice”

...

To keep poor and working class white people near the bottom from establishing relationships of resistance with people of color, white people are constantly given the impression that they are in danger, in danger from people of color below them who will take away their jobs and anything else they have, and in danger from Jews above them who will exploit and control them.

...

In this situation no one is safe because protection is conditional. The ruling class offers safe haven, economic success, voting rights, tolerance and even status as honorary whites such as it has to Jews, Asian Americans or other groups when support is needed. And then quickly withdraws those benefits and protection, setting up the wrath of the rest of the populace, when scapegoats and a diversion are needed.

So what do we do to respond to this complicated set of circumstances? If we as Jews work against racism, but poor and working class whites and people of color continue to attack Jews as the common source of their problems, we have increased the risk to ourselves and done nothing to attack the economic roots of injustice in this country. Therefore we can only work effectively against racism if anti-Semitism is on the agenda as well.

...

Non-Jews need to know that as a Jew, I participate in the struggle against racism as part of my identity and in fighting for justice, equality, the end of exploitation, *and* for my personal and group safety. My greatest effectiveness as an ally to people of color comes from my history and experience as a Jew.

I want to give some brief examples of where the kind of coalition politics I am referring to is being attempted by Jews:

- Jews for Racial and Economic Justice in New York, which is working on labor organizing and immigrant issues in the Asian community;
- The Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago, which is doing education and organizing around housing and economic justice issues;
- The Progressive Jewish Alliance in Los Angeles and in the San Francisco Bay Area, which is connecting individuals Jews and Jewish congregations to grassroots struggles for worker and immigrant rights; and
- Jews of color throughout the country are working to reclaim their cultures and to establish recognition, autonomy and participation within the Jewish community.

...

In conclusion, I want to leave you with a quote from Rabbi Tarfon, a fifth century Jewish leader, so that you have something to hold on to when the discussion about “What is White?” dies down, and the question, “So what are you going to do about it?” remains. Rather than being overwhelmed by the task ahead we should remember Rabbi Tarfon’s words:

It is not upon you to finish the task.
Neither are you free to desist from it.