

“Privilege, Power & Perspective”

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Way back when I was a first-year rabbinic student at Hebrew Union College, I lived in a cozy apartment in the Rehavia neighborhood of Jerusalem. Our place was ... petite, nothing fancy, already furnished and set up with the basic accoutrements... one frying pan, one cutting board, one good knife and six wine bottle openers. You know, just in case.

The apartment was a garden-level unit and you had to descend twelve or so steep steps to get from the street to the front door. My roommate and I thought nothing of the stairs when we signed the lease – it seemed like a decent place to live for a year, plus we figured the times we’d need to drag heavy stuff up and down would be limited.

I thought nothing of those stairs until mid-February ... when, one regular old school day, I rose and got dressed, hurried through my routine, grabbed a granola bar and headed for the exit. As I locked the front door behind me and strode toward the stairs, it dawned on me that my legs ... just ... felt ... *really weird*.

I approached the first step, raised one leg to climb and instantly felt a sharp, shooting pain that knocked the wind out of me. I must have cried out, doubled over and shocked. I tried to take another step, but that one hurt worse than the first. I froze – certain I must have been having a serious leg cramp and needed only to sit down, breathe, take a sip of water and wait for the pain to pass.

Only – the pain didn’t pass ... and by the time I made it to the top of those stairs, tears streaming down my face, I decided to head straight to urgent care instead of the classroom.

For those who have been fortunate to travel, and to foreign countries in particular, there are few things as scary as a health crisis far from home. It’s a profound lesson in vulnerability ... and surrendering to forces beyond your control.

How much the more so when you’re living abroad for eleven months and learn that your ability to walk has been compromised indefinitely.

The official diagnosis was “Reactive Arthritis.” In short, following a nasty cold, my immune system attacked the joints in my legs, sore from an intense hike in the hills of the Galilee. For about six weeks, I struggled to walk. When I used my legs – which was (obviously) every day – it felt like I was being stabbed hundreds of times over. Sometimes the pain was worse, sometimes it wasn’t too bad ... and I’d hope I was getting better. But the condition persisted ... it wouldn’t go away ... and over those six weeks I often wondered ... *“will I ever walk normally again?”*

I am so grateful that, just as the Israeli doctors believed would happen, and just as my father, a physician, assured me, I got better. I healed. It wound up being an unfortunate little chapter – a tiny blip on the narrative that is my life’s story.

But ... let me assure you – *nothing* in this world makes you recognize how privileged you are to be able-bodied than being rendered – suddenly and without warning – *dis-abled* for an unknown period of time.

It’s the very definition of that old adage, “*you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.*”

(pause)

I’ve thought about that episode of my life quite a bit recently, as I’ve prepared for a High Holiday season so radically different from any one I can remember celebrating in my thirty-three years on this planet.

In truth, it’s been a *really wild ride* since last year’s High Holidays, which – as Rabbi Lisa so beautifully spoke of last night – were at the time rife with relevance and urgency, falling just one month prior to one of the most divisive national elections in American history.

It was haunting to sit with my rabbinic colleagues in Seattle last summer, preparing our High Holiday service orders and sermons ... viewing eternal themes of compassion, repentance and justice in a more modern, significantly more troubling light. After all, the 2016 election brought out the worst in many, the best in some. The partisan rancor, aggression and a constant deluge of chaos was exhausting ... and it certainly didn’t end November 9.

(pause)

Now, regardless of political preference, we who are gathered here today, Yom Kippur, share one powerful thing in common: we are Jews, united by tradition and history, ritual and heritage. Today we are bound together by this most heavy of holidays – it’s a time for introspection, honesty and *cheshbon ha’nefesh* – the hard work of the soul.

Today is a day for reflection. And in reflecting on the last year of our lives there is one undeniable, unavoidable truth that unites us all:

It’s a really strange time to be an American Jew.

For so many of us – regardless of our background, profession, what’s in our bank account or how we vote – this past year has held a surreal series of lessons on who we are ... where we fit in this complicated America in which we live ... truly, in which we’ve always lived ... and, ultimately, what we believe in.

And, just as I did not realize how fortunate I was to be able-bodied ... and strong ... until I no longer had full use of my legs ... perhaps many of us sitting in this room right now did

not realize how *fortunate* we actually were ... until ... the world shifted ... for some ever-so-slightly, for others... monumentally and permanently.

Until the first travel ban.

Or the second.

Until 'Repeal and Replace.'

Until a proposed ban on transgender soldiers in the military.

Until three catastrophic hurricanes in a span of three weeks.

Until DACA.

Until the Dallas Cowboys took a knee on Monday evening in an expression of solidarity; an example of that old, enduring tenet of our democracy: free speech.

Perhaps many of us did not realize how deep were America's *intersecting* wounds of hatred, fear, intolerance and injustice ... until this past year. Or, at least, until this past summer when, on a Shabbat morning in mid-August, white supremacists marched through Charlottesville, Virginia with Swastika flags, shouting anti-Semitic language, armed with semi-automatic weapons.

A bubble of security certainly burst for me that day ... and, I would imagine, for many of you, as well. Whatever lifelong *privilege* I'd unknowingly held as a white, Ashkenazi Jew, born and raised in LA ... *a place where anti-Semitism was an ancient relic, a thing of the past!* ... well, that privilege would never look the same to me again.

It certainly wasn't our first public brush with anti-Semitism this year. In fact, back in March my former congregation in Seattle was a lead story in the international news circuit ... after we found graffiti stating, "Holocaust is Fake Hi\$tory" spray-painted on Temple property ... and then, hours later, we were forced to evacuate the building due to a bomb scare.

It was violating and ugly; it was a day that made all of us angry, scared and disgusted.

But I'll never forget the sense of security many of us felt ... knowing that it took less than five minutes for police officers to arrive on the scene. Knowing that Seattle's Chief of Police herself would check in on the synagogue later that day, or that news outlets would literally be lining up reporters to interview our senior rabbi for his thoughts on the whole thing.

I wondered ... if a black church in Seattle's less affluent, more ethnically diverse Central District might get the same response upon discovering racist graffiti on their property.

(pause)

Perhaps many of us – in looking back on the year that was – are still trying to figure out what all this means; how it shapes our understanding of ourselves, our families, our values, our *Jewishness*. After all, we Jews are caught somewhere in the middle: we are a *minority*, but a *powerful* and often *well-protected* one.

But who are we – when *we're not* the direct targets of someone else's hate? Who are we – when we're not defined as People of Color? Who are we – when we're not the ones living in poverty, or uneducated, undocumented, uninsured?

And who are we ... when *our* families ... our community ... our faith ... become the targets of hatred, discrimination, or violence?

And how do we move forward ... when so many of us are hurting, grieving, and afraid?

(pause)

Privilege itself has many layers, and I would argue each one of us probably holds a slightly different way of understanding it or feeling its presence in our lives. But we know it exists; that it colors our assumptions and our way of looking at the world.

Privilege is peculiar. It touches on race, *gender*, education and accessibility to resources we've been handed or fought hard for along life's journey. It keeps us in bubbles – bubbles we don't always realize we're living in. And privilege blinds us, but it often stems from encounters nebulous and vague.

And yet, privilege has been a main focus these past few weeks ... as I've done my own *cheshbon ha-nefesh*; a young, passionate rabbi just trying to build community, heal divides, "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," as the old saying about clergy goes.

Here's how Merriam-Webster defines privilege: "a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor." Now, in my own orbit – that of a white *woman* with good health insurance and a good job – I can think of many examples from the past year when privilege touched my life in some way: big or small, positive or detrimental.

But if there's one thing – one piece of enduring, concrete wisdom I've taken from this past year, it is this – *to truly move forward out of this time of great pain and adversity, to heal and unite and bring people together in spite of their differences, one must be willing to pierce the bubbles of privilege and difference, tap into the well of empathy that resides within us, place our feet in the shoes of another ... and choose to lead with love.* (pause)

It might seem both frighteningly simple and incredibly complex. It may feel totally tangible and also painfully difficult. But, truthfully, we need look no further than Yom Kippur's sacred text ... to find one well-known character navigating the perils of privilege itself.

The Haftarah for this afternoon's service is the Book of Jonah, a story from TaNaKh that many of us know by heart. In the story, God calls out to Jonah, instructs him to journey to the wicked city of Nineveh and demand that its citizens repent or face their demise.

Jonah ... is just some regular guy and – for reasons not fully explained – *he's* the one God chooses. Jonah is set apart ... to do something big. But Jonah at first refuses to listen to God, hardening his heart to the suffering of others. He escapes to the port of Jaffa, to a boat that will lead him to the great big fish and his moment of clarity within its belly.

At first, Jonah rejects the task forced upon him. He's not from Nineveh – *he owes them nothing*. Yet his 'aha moment' within the fish pushes him ... to shift his perspective. He realizes the responsibility he holds to something bigger than himself alone ... and he pierces a bubble of his own privilege. Eventually, his intervention – on behalf of total strangers – saves their lives. Thus, the Book of Jonah becomes more than a story about 'man and leviathan' – it becomes a tale of trust, repentance, privilege ... and *perspective*.

(pause)

This ... is a new year. A clean slate. A fresh start. What a beautiful gift from our tradition.

None of us knows how any of this will turn out. We're all just taking it day by day, just as we have ... for centuries.

But we're all in this together ... whether or not we *realize* it. Whether or not we *witness* it day-to-day. We need one another. We *depend* on each other. To retreat to our known, private corners just doesn't work ... and it certainly won't do much to heal the deep wounds that, as we've witnessed many times over this past year, truly affect *every one of us*.

And so ... today, I ask you: in this new year – this strange and sacred time to be alive – how will we push past that which we've taken for granted ... and, perhaps ... open our minds to something bigger, something beyond our individual bubbles – our needs, goals, desires ... and our perspective?

This year, I ask you: will we who hold *power* we often can't see ... be willing to stand up for those whose voices aren't often heard ... those whose stories and circumstances do not necessarily echo our own? Will we look beyond our own bubbles and open our eyes to the suffering of others, protecting and raising one another up in the process? I certainly hope so – for who knows when the fickle finger of hate will once again find itself pointed in *our* direction?

It might seem both frighteningly simple and incredibly complex. It may feel totally tangible and also painfully difficult. We cannot change much about our circumstances, the color of our skin or the resources we've inherited or earned throughout our lives. But we are human beings ... capable of change ... and it is absolutely possible for a human to shift his or her perspective ever-so-slightly ... or monumentally and permanently.

And who knows what blessings *that* can reap in this new year?

(pause)

May this new year be, for us, for all Israel, and the entire world ... a year in which division brings us closer together, empathy makes our hearts grow even larger and privilege opens our eyes to a world of potential good, if we let it.

G'mar Tov.