

Talking Race and Racism, from Ferguson to Campus: A Hillel Conversation

Brown RISD Hillel - Sunday, December 14, 2014 - 23 Kislev 5775

Blurb used in advertising:

This conversation is intended to initiate an ongoing dialogue at Hillel for students to explore how we as Jews of often mixed and certainly complex identities are navigating (engaging in and/or avoiding) recent conversations and events connected to race, power, oppression and privilege on our campus and in our country. How are we seeing ourselves and our role as Jews in America at this time? How do we feel our identities are judged when/where we do or do not engage? **To what extents (if at all) do we, as Jews, see ourselves as white, privileged, powerful, oppressed, and/or able/obligated to be in solidarity/allyship with People of Color in the wake of the verdicts on the Mike Brown and Eric Garner cases and in the climate of racial injustice and inequality in this country?** This conversation intends not to resolve or reach consensus on Jewish identity or appropriate roles or stances vis a vis the issues at play, but to increase reflexivity and awareness around them and inspire further conversation, inquiry and action. Dinner will be served. This event is a partnership between J-MIG (Jews of Mixed Identity Group) and Tzedek (Hillel's Justice Committee).

How we (the rabbi and 5 student leaders) co-conducted the evening:

The pages that follow are the materials that were handed out to participants in the conversation. After a brief introduction by Rabbi Dardashti about how this conversation came to be and why it is so important, in our world and on our campus, we reviewed the community guidelines. One student facilitator read the listed guidelines aloud, and participants offered suggestions as to what should be added (e.g. one participant suggested the addition of “trust intent, name impact,” which he explained to the group). After the guidelines were read and agreed upon, we moved to the guiding question, bolded in above blurb. Another student facilitator then read the question and indicated that participants should reference and reflect on their own personal answers and those offered by the texts throughout the evening. From that point, we moved into reading the texts together as a full group; each text was read aloud, with participants around the circle each reading consecutive paragraphs. After each of our three texts, participants were given 2-3 minutes to reflect and jot down notes, with student facilitators prompting participants to think about thoughts and feelings the readings brought up. Participants were particularly encouraged to think about how their readings of each text were informed by the guiding question, as well as the text(s) read previously. After reading and reflecting upon all of the texts, we broke up into smaller groups for student-facilitated conversations. Participants had a minute to read back through their notes and collect their thoughts, and then each participant was given 2 minutes to share their responses to the texts and the guiding questions. After each participant in the group spoke, we transitioned into connected conversation. We concluded the evening by reconvening as a full group to close and commit to further conversation and engagement with this topic.

Student leaders: Adam Waters – '15, Rachel Leiken –'16, Hannah Liu-'16, Natalia Ginsberg-'18, Amani Hayes-Messinger-'18,

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Communication Guidelines*

1. I will speak for myself, not as a representative of a group. I will not ask others to represent, defend or explain an entire group. **I will make 'I' statements** rather than 'we' or 'you' statements.
2. I will **avoid making broad generalizations and grand pronouncements**. Instead, I will connect what I know and believe to my experiences and particular sources of information.
3. I will **express my different viewpoints in a thoughtful manner** and without an insulting spirit. I will keep in mind my goals of learning and reflection. I may respectfully disagree with others, but I will resist the urge to persuade them to "my side."
4. I will **listen with resilience**, "hanging in" when I hear something that is hard to hear. I will take personal time if I find that I am no longer able to listen with a clear mind and an open heart.
5. I will **share airtime** and refrain from interrupting others, except to indicate that I cannot hear a speaker. I will participate within the time frames suggested by the facilitators. I will **avoid making lengthy statements** and will not argue with other participants in connected conversation.
6. All **small-group conversations are confidential**. In conversations outside of the group I will not attribute particular statements to particular individuals by name or identifying information without permission.
7. I will **ask questions from a place of genuine curiosity** and in service of the asked.

*Adapted from Encounter's Communication Guidelines, inspired by the 2004 Public Conversations Project.

To what extents (if at all) do we, as Jews, see ourselves as:

- **White**
- **Privileged**
- **Powerful**
- **Oppressed**
- **Able/obligated to be in solidarity/allyship with People of Color in the wake of the verdicts on the Mike Brown and Eric Garner cases and in the climate of racial injustice and inequality in this country?**

Excerpt from Gina Crosley-Corcoran's "Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person"

The concept of Intersectionality recognizes that people can be privileged in some ways and definitely not privileged in others. There are many different types of privilege, not just skin color privilege, that impact the way people can move through the world or are discriminated against. These are all things you are born into, not things you earned, that afford you opportunities others may not have.

And listen, recognizing Privilege doesn't mean suffering guilt or shame for your lot in life. Nobody's saying that Straight White Middle Class Able-Bodied Males are all a bunch of assholes who don't work hard for what they have. Recognizing Privilege simply means being aware that some people have to work much harder just to experience the things you take for granted (if they ever can experience them at all.)

[...] There are a million ways I experience Privilege, and some that I certainly don't. But thankfully, Intersectionality allows us to examine these varying dimensions and degrees of discrimination while raising awareness of the results of multiple systems of oppression at work.

<http://occupywallstreet.net/story/explaining-white-privilege-broke-white-person>

**Excerpt from Tal Fortgang's "Checking My Privilege: Character as the Basis of Privilege"
April 2, 2014**

Perhaps it's the privilege my grandfather and his brother had to flee their home as teenagers when the Nazis invaded Poland, leaving their mother and five younger siblings behind, running and running until they reached a Displaced Persons camp in Siberia, where they would do years of hard labor in the bitter cold until World War II ended. Maybe it was the privilege my grandfather had of taking on the local Rabbi's work in that DP camp, telling him that the spiritual leader shouldn't do hard work, but should save his energy to pass Jewish tradition along to those who might survive. Perhaps it was the privilege my great-grandmother and those five great-aunts and uncles I never knew had of being shot into an open grave outside their hometown. Maybe that's my privilege.

Or maybe it's the privilege my grandmother had of spending weeks upon weeks on a death march through Polish forests in subzero temperatures, one of just a handful to survive, only to be put in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she would have died but for the Allied forces who liberated her and helped her regain her health when her weight dwindled to barely 80 pounds.

Perhaps my privilege is that those two resilient individuals came to America with no money and no English, obtained citizenship, learned the language and met each other; that my grandfather started a humble wicker basket business with nothing but long hours, an idea, and an iron will—to paraphrase the man I never met: "I escaped Hitler. Some business troubles are going to ruin me?" Maybe my privilege is that they worked hard enough to raise four children, and to send them to Jewish day school and eventually City College.

Perhaps it was my privilege that my own father worked hard enough in City College to earn a spot at a top graduate school, got a good job, and for 25 years got up well before the crack of dawn, sacrificing precious time he wanted to spend with those he valued most—his wife and kids—to earn that living. I can say with certainty there was no legacy involved in any of his accomplishments. The wicker business just isn't that influential. Now would you say that we've been really privileged? That our success has been gift-wrapped?

<http://theprincetontory.com/main/checking-my-privilege-character-as-the-basis-of-privilege/>

Excerpt from an article by Jay Michaelson, "Why Jews Should Care About Ferguson" August 19, 2014

A conflagration like Ferguson, Missouri, cannot be reduced to a single factor. It is a combination of racism, militarization, economic insecurity, the widening wealth gap, disenfranchisement, black rage, and God knows what else.

Nor can it be reduced to a few bad guys. The issue is not whether Police Officer Darren Wilson is a racist or not. What matters is how he and Michael Brown are part of structures of racism and oppression that are far more powerful than any individual. Yes, Brown was shot six times by Wilson. But he was killed by a "bonfire of the vanities," this tragic web of circumstances and power relationships that you and I are part of too.

And if you and I are part of that web, then we, too, are implicated in the way in which structures of oppression continue to hurt the most vulnerable — whether the victims are unarmed black men on the streets of Staten Island or Missouri, or six-year-olds crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, or women whose bodies are controlled by men.

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.

[...]

Yet 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.

This is not a utopian program. Inequality is unavoidable, if we also want freedom. Which is why the intersectional Biblical imperative remains operative: to counteract these inevitable structures of oppression as best we can. We will never complete this work. But at least we can stand on the right side of history.

<http://forward.com/articles/204280/why-jews-should-care-about-ferguson/#ixzz3KtDsPag8>

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