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Rosh Hashana – Day 1
Judaism and Racism

There is a famous *midrash* about God's creation of Adam in the Garden of Eden: Our Rabbis taught: Man was created alone to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be God: For if a human being strikes many coins from the same mold, they all resemble one another. But the Supreme Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy One, Blessed be God, fashions every human being in the image of the first man, and yet not one of them resembles another. Therefore every single person is obliged to say:

"כל העולם לא נברא אלא בשבילי"

The world was created for my sake." (TB Sanhedrin 37a)

This profound statement defines how Judaism thinks about human beings, their relationship to each other, and to our Creator. All human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God and in the image of *Adam Harishon*, Adam, the first human being. We are all descendants of Adam and Eve and therefore kin. No matter our height, weight, the color of our eyes, or the color of our skin, we are all members of the same family.

These physical differences that seemingly distinguish us, in truth, reflect the wonder and diversity of creation.

Race continues to be a contentious issue in this country and throughout the world. No matter how much we try to ignore it, the color of a person's skin or their ethnic origin often affects how we relate to them.

A few years ago I saw a hysterical off-Broadway musical, Avenue Q. These are the lyrics to one of its most irreverent, but honest, songs:

“Everyone's a little bit racist
Sometimes.
Doesn't mean we go
Around committing hate crimes.
Look around and you will find
No one's really color blind.

Maybe it's a fact
We all should face
Everyone makes judgments
Based on race.

Everyone's a little bit racist
Today.
So, everyone's a little bit racist
Okay!
Ethnic jokes might be uncouth,
But you laugh because
They're based on truth.
Don't take them as
Personal attacks.
Everyone enjoys them -
So relax!”

Racism is not always manifested by such acts as crossing the street when you see a person of color behind you, or being afraid to board a plane if there is a Muslim on board.

It is usually more subtle. In a movie I saw not too long ago, a well-to-do couple came out of a restaurant with a box full of leftovers. The wife saw a black man in jeans standing on the street. She said to her husband, "He needs this more than we do." When she held out the box to him he looked at her and said, "I'm waiting for a table."

As Jews, we have a unique perspective on racism and cultural prejudice in society. We have the perspective of victims, and at times, the perspective of perpetrators.

We don't like to think that Jews are racist or prejudice, but sometimes we are.

When I was a student rabbi in Maywood, New Jersey in the seventies, the plight of Ethiopian Jewry was just coming to light. We showed a film about what were at that time called "Falashas" that was produced by one of their first advocates, Meyer Levin, z"l.

After the film we had a question and answer session. I will never forget the man who stood up and asked, “Rabbi, if one of these Ethiopian Jews came to our synagogue, would we let them become a member?”

California boy that I am, I was shocked by the question. I asked him, “George, what do you mean?” even though I knew full well what he meant.

“Rabbi, would we let one of them in?”

I responded, “I still don’t know what you mean.”

He tried again, “Rabbi, you know, would we let one of these Ethiopians become a member?”

I finally said to him, “If the Chief Rabbi of Israel thinks they’re Jews, that’s good enough for me.” I am sure, however, that this was not good enough for George.

Other times our prejudice is subtler. I am glad to say I don’t see this now, but several years ago it was not unusual for one or two of our members to approach a dark skinned visitor who was sitting in the service with a *tallit*, *kipah*, and *siddur* and ask them: “Are you a convert?” For the most part, I think this comment was born of curiosity more than racism, but the question was never asked of someone who was white.

One time, however, a very dark-skinned Yemenite woman, whose Jewish roots could be traced back generations, was visiting. Some of our

members who saw her could be heard whispering, “She’s a *shvartza*.” I was mortified that here in the synagogue she was defined not by her distinguished Jewish ancestry but by the color of her skin.

From the beginning, Judaism has been a religion that has paid no heed to color or ethnic background. The Biblical Moses married a Cushite woman, a woman who was born in Nubia or Ethiopia, and hence dark skinned.

Miriam and Aaron, Moses’ siblings, didn’t like it.

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִטְעָה עַל-אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֹּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי-אִשָּׁה

כֹּשִׁית לָקַח:

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he married: ‘He married a Cushite woman [they said].’”

God was not pleased with their comments. Moses punished Miriam by striking her with snow-white scales, or Leprosy. Aaron apologized and begged Moses to intervene on Miriam’s behalf. Moses prayed to God:

אֵל נָא רַפֵּא נָא לָהּ:

“O God, pray heal her!” – the shortest prayer in the Bible, by the way – and Miriam was healed.

Even what seem an exception to the “color blindness” of Jewish tradition proves the rule.

According to Deuteronomy 23:4-5: “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-Naharaim, to curse you.”

And yet, later on in the *Tanakh* we find a Moabite who becomes one of Israel’s most treasured converts. Ruth, the Moabite, followed her mother-in-law Naomi from the land of Moab to Bethlehem after both of their husbands died.

When Naomi tried to keep Ruth from accompanying her, she responded with the famous words that are spoken to by every Jew by Choice: “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you.

כִּי אֶל-אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלַי וּבְאֲשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֶלֶּיךָ עִמָּךְ עִמִּי וְאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי:

For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16)

Ruth, the Moabite, not only became a Jew, she became the great-grandmother of King David, and hence the ancestress of the long awaited Messiah.

This is truly amazing. The Torah says that a Moabite is not allowed to enter the people of Israel even in the tenth generation, and yet Ruth, a first generation Moabite, becomes the ancestress of the Messiah.

Why did the *Tanakh*, the Bible, make an exception to its own rule? Because Ruth's lovingkindness and selfless spirit overrode the Biblical prohibition. Her goodness made the Israelites color blind to her past.

This past year I was also intrigued by another story about race that made the national news.

Rachel Dolezal, the head of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Spokane, Washington was forced to resign after being accused of pretending to be black. Dolezal, who is Caucasian, told a local television station: "If I was asked, yes I would definitely say yes I do consider myself to be black."

Camille Gear Rich, a professor of law and sociology at USC Gould School of Law, wrote in an editorial published by CNN: “Like it or not, we have entered into an era of elective race -- a time when people expect that one has a right and dignity to claim the identity of one's choice...Dolezal claims that she has been in love with black aesthetics since childhood. The decision to adopt a black female aesthetic for herself is a political act given that Americans in general assume black women are not aesthetically as desirable as white women. Yet, others reduce her aesthetic choices to mere cultural appropriation...I will not indict her for her choice to link herself to this community, and I would consider her claim no greater if she identified a long lost African ancestor.”

[\(http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/15/opinions/rich-rachel-dolezal/\)](http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/15/opinions/rich-rachel-dolezal/)

However, according to Ijeoma Oluo, who wrote in the Seattle Globalist, “White teachers can and do teach African-American-centered courses all the time, and often do it very well. But it’s important for students to know if they are getting first or second-hand perspective. It’s important to know if opinions being discussed come from people who have actually experienced what they are talking about.”

<http://seattleglobalist.com/2015/06/15/rachel-dolezal-lies-hurt-black-people-spokane-ijeoma-oluo/38338>

What Oluo asserted was, that having been raised as a white woman, there is no way Dolezal could have understood or assimilated the black experience. “If Rachel Dolezal really, truly cared about the black community, then she would have known (especially as a professor of African-American studies) how inappropriate it is as a white woman to try to speak for black people,” Oluo wrote.

What struck me about Oluo’s claims were how antithetical they are to our attitude toward those who want to enter the Jewish community. The Jewish community not only welcomes outsiders who want to cross religious, cultural, ethnic, and national borders and join with us as Jews, we consider them as brothers and sisters in every way, including sharing the same historical experience.

Moses Maimonides, who lived in Egypt in the twelfth century, received a letter from a convert named *Ovadia*, whose fellow congregants told him it was prohibited to pray in the synagogue “Our God and God of our ancestors,” because his ancestors were idolaters.

This is how the Rambam answered: “Yes, you may say all this [Our God and God of our ancestors] in the prescribed order and not change it in

the least. In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessing and prayer, you, too, shall bless and pray alike, whether you are alone or pray in the congregation...There is no difference whatever between you and us. You shall certainly say the blessing, “Who has chosen us,” “Who has given us,” “Who have taken us for Your own” and “Who has separated us”: for the Creator, may He be extolled, has indeed chosen you and separated you from the nations and given you the Torah...Do not consider your origin as inferior. While we are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you derive from Him through whose word the world was created.” (Letter to Obadia)

When someone converts to Judaism we consider them a Jew in every way. They become part of the Jewish Nation and share our history and culture. To paraphrase Ruth, our People becomes their People, and our God, their God. As we read in the book of Exodus:

תִּנְוֹרָה אֶחָת יִהְיֶה לְאִזְרָח וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

“There shall be one law for the born Jew and the convert.” (Ex. 12:49)

I often joke, but in truth am deadly serious, when I tell a potential Jew by Choice that they will know when they have “crossed the line” and fully assimilated Jewish identity when they wake up Sunday mornings not

craving bacon and eggs, but bagels, cream cheese, and lox. They are fully Jewish when they enter a synagogue and do not feel like a stranger, but as a member of the tribe. And it is an obligation of long-time members of the Jewish community to welcome them and help them feel that they have come home.

Finally, I cannot speak about racism today without addressing the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

The “Black Lives Matter” movement was born last year after Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri. The Justice Department cleared Officer Wilson of any wrongdoing but also cited the police department of Ferguson for abusive policing practices over the years.

The Washington Post claims that police have killed at least 60 unarmed people this year, but that black men, who make up just 6 percent of the population, account for 40 percent of those unarmed men who are killed.

Though others may disagree, I don’t think that the reason a disproportionate number of black males are questioned and detained by police is because of overt racism, but rather the more subtle and

unconscious racism I have already described. As the song, “Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist” slyly implies, most of us have not completely eradicated prejudice and stereotyping from our lives, including – but not especially – officers of the law.

I have unlimited respect and admiration for those who spend their days protecting the citizens of this country, but I would not want to be a police officer. I would not want to place myself in a position where I need to make split-second decisions that have life or death consequences.

Law enforcement agents take their lives in their hands each day. They need to act in the middle of often contentious, confusing, and threatening situations. A wrong decision may lead to the death of innocent or unarmed individuals, but it may just as easily lead to the death of bystanders or law enforcement agents themselves.

Nonetheless, it seems that in some communities police officers need better training so that these sad and unfortunate incidents do not take place. I understand the anger of the African American community, many of whom have felt the sting of being singled out or harassed because of the color of their skin, not only by law enforcement but by others. More must be done to teach all members of our society not to distinguish between human

beings because of the color of their skin, national, cultural, or religious background.

However, my sense is that today there is a general uptick in violence in our society and in the world. Human life is not seen as infinite but rather as of diminished value. We see this devaluation of human life not only in the deaths of young black men, but in shooting sprees in movie theaters and schools, attacks on soldiers in recruiting stations, and senseless murders on city streets.

We also see it in the heinous attacks of ISIS and Boko Haram, the bombing and shooting of civilians in Syria, and the sectarian massacres in Sudan and other African states.

We also see it in the reckless acts of those who speed or drive under the influence on our highways, in the operators of drones who fly over wildfires, preventing planes from dropping water or fire retardant, or near airports, endangering aircraft filled with passengers, and those who shine laser beams into airplane cockpits.

After the murder of Harris County Deputy Darren Goforth, Sheriff Ron Hickman made what some have called a “controversial” statement: “We’ve heard black lives matter, all lives matter. Well, cops lives matter, too. So, why don’t we just drop the qualifying and just say lives matter.”

Sherriff Hickman was criticized for seeming to be insensitive to the disproportionate number of black men who are killed.

Such criticism astounds me. I believe that as a society we need to diminish all acts of murder and violence and not focus on one population alone.

Whatever our interpretation of the Second Amendment's right to bear arms, I think we can all agree that we need to prevent firearms from being acquired by the mentally ill, and we must find a way to curb gun violence and the irresponsible use of firearms.

I usually don't quote crime fiction novels in sermons, but author Michael Connelly has Los Angeles Detective Harry Bosch utter the same memorable words in each of his books: "Everybody matters or nobody matters." What Bosch means is that every life is sacred, regardless of who they are, where they grew up, or the color of their skin. Once we begin to distinguish between the value of one human life versus another, then we can easily find a reason to say that John Doe's life is more significant than Jane Doe's, or that your life is more important than mine.

Harry Bosch isn't Jewish, but he could have been. In his creed, "Everybody matters or nobody matters," he is echoing the words of our sages. Most of us recognize them from the movie "Schindler's List":

כל המציל נפש אחת כאילו הציל עולם מלא

“One who saves one human life; it is as if he or she had saved the entire world.” The value of one life is equal to the value of all lives.

Human life has infinite value. We all descend from one set of ancestors, Adam and Eve. Unless we, as a society and world, find a way to recognize the sacredness of all human life – that all lives matter, I fear that the violence roiling around us will continue to fester and explode.

The next time we look at our neighbor or meet a stranger, let us not judge him or her by physical appearance. Let us rather recognize the glow of the Divine spark that dwells within.