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Hot Topic: Even though Jews are a minority, they are, in the main, racially classified as "white." How should Jews respond to class and privilege in American society?

UNDERSTANDING PRIVILEGE

by Emilia Diamant

"WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY."-Stan Lee/Voltaire

We benefit from white privilege. We have significant power and status in this country. So what are we doing with it?

I wrote these questions up on the board to start one of my Monday night post-confirmation classes at Temple Beth Or in Raleigh, NC. We had spent time talking about what it means to be Jewish in the South, we had discussed the basic concepts of privilege — racial, religious, class based, etc. Now it was time to think about how this group of almost entirely white, almost entirely upper middle class group of teens could understand the power that comes with privilege. As they say in Spiderman, with great power comes great responsibility.

I'm curious about these questions. Are teenagers being asked to push the boundaries of their understanding of Jewish identity enough to grapple with cross-cultural dialogue? Are we, as Jewish educators, providing space for our youth to interact with disenfranchised communities in order to better understand their role in power and privilege in the United States? I argue that we are not.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is one of my greatest sources of inspiration in helping to understand the role of Jews as they relate to communities in need. It is hard, often, for Jews in America to wrap their minds around being privileged. We have a massive genocide to point to; we have experienced discrimination in this country within recent memory. But, in 2012, it is hard to deny that we are predominantly white and upper middle class. Yes, it is exciting that in large cities we are starting to buck that stereotype — but in my class of 20 students, only two would not benefit from white privilege when driving down the highway or walking into a clothing store. It's not easy to straddle this divide; we know persecution, but also prosperity. Many of us are white, but we often find situations where we feel like "the other."

It is important that Jewish educators begin to address this — it's easy to shy away from a topic that can create strife and conflict within ourselves — but if we don't ask young people to start examining these questions, we are doing them a great disservice. For students who don't benefit from white privilege within the Jewish community, acknowledging the differences and helping to understand how to better enable our communities to be inclusive, we are creating space for TRUE and EXAMINED diversity within our own ranks.

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Why teens? Because they are most willing to sit down and have the conversation. They are exploring their own identities, and, if we add this piece to the puzzle, they are likely to get a fuller sense of self down the line. Examining race and class with religion, gender, and sexual orientation is something we don't do enough of.

And once we've had a chance to allow our students to think about who they are, let's sit down and discuss that with others. Let's bring back major programming for Jewish and Black teens. Let's do more than just service learning and also understand the roots of homelessness and engage people who have experienced it in meaningful conversations. The more difficult the question, the more frontally we should embrace it.

When I asked my teens in Raleigh these questions, they were uncomfortable, they bucked a little at the idea of holding privilege, but within an hour and a half there was a basic understanding of what that means — not that we are held accountable for the sins of those who came before us — but that we are important stakeholders in the fight for civil rights. And these teens acknowledged openly that the fight is far from over.

Heschel said it best—“Let [young people] be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can do — every one — our share to redeem the world despite of all absurdities and all the frustration and all disappointments. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to live life as if it were a work of art. You're not a machine. When you are young, start working on this great work of art called your own existence.”

Emilia Diamant, MSW, just completed a summer at Genesis Summer Program at Brandeis, where she was a Community Educator focusing on intersections between Jews and communities of color in Boston. Currently, she is the Director of Programming and Initiatives at Prozdor High School in Boston, MA. She has worked with youth for eight years as advisor, principal, mentor, counselor, and program director.

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