Black Lives Matter

The High Holydays are the time of year we are asked to give special focus on self-improvement. Though ultimately the goal is to atone for our sins by reaching outward to those we have hurt, the journey has to begin by looking inward, by calling to mind those sins and perhaps identifying the flaws that led us to sin in the first place. Unfortunately for human beings, it’s much easier to identify in others the flaws and failings we cannot see in ourselves. In fact, we are remarkably good at judging others and giving ourselves a pass. Recognizing this, an 18th century Torah commentator suggests that when God said “you shall appoint judges for yourself,” what God really had in mind was “As if to say, you should appoint judges within yourself. Every person has the obligation to sit in judgment of themselves and their own actions. First judge yourself, and then, using the same yardstick, judge others. Do not be lenient with your faults while judging harshly the same faults in others; do not overlook sin in yourself while demanding perfection of others.”

He makes it sound very simple, doesn’t he? But we know that it isn’t so easy. Sometimes despite our best intentions, and our best efforts, we harbor flaws that we simply do not know we have, and we only become aware of them when something unusual happens, or when someone else points it out. This morning I want to share with you a story about one of those flaws. It’s a true story. I know it’s true because it happened to me.

In 2019 I was asked to do a graveside funeral for the brother of a former Temple member who I will call Ann. Ann’s kids were grown, she had relocated to the city, the family burial plot was in Valhalla, and the deceased brother, who I will call George, had no other family. Of course I agreed to officiate. I arrived at the cemetery to find a tiny group; Ann, her two grown sons, and a young woman I did not know who was standing next to the eldest son.   
In hindsight, it was completely reasonable for me to assume that she was a girlfriend I had not met, and to go up to them, ask to be introduced to her, and make a comment such as, “you know, I also do weddings.” It would have been completely reasonable – but that’s not what I did. I wish I had. Instead, I walked up to them, turned to the young woman and asked “were you George’s health care aide?”

The son quickly said, “No this is a good friend of mine,” while at the same time the woman said, “I’m not the help.” By her response, you may know why I mistakenly assumed she was an aide and not a girlfriend - the young woman was black. I stammered an apology, and we proceeded to the gravesite. I know that I did a nice funeral because I got a lovely thank you note. But I have almost no personal recollection of how it went, because I was still thinking about what I had assumed about this young black woman and how I had embarrassed her. To say I was mortified does not begin to convey the depth of my emotion. It took me almost six months to think about that moment without cringing. Eventually I started sharing this story with close friends, all of whom were white. Sometimes my friends have tried to ease my guilt. “Don’t be so hard on yourself,” they say, “it was an honest mistake. So many of the home healthcare aides are black; it was a natural assumption.”

Well, it happens to be true that many of the home healthcare aides in New York are black. But it’s also true that most black New Yorkers are not health care aides. They are of course in a wide array of jobs, professions and careers, and only a small sliver of them work as aides. And so here’s the point. Jumping to the conclusion at a funeral that a single black person is most likely there as a healthcare worker and not simply as a friend of the family **is** a natural assumption to make, but only for a white person. A second black person at that funeral would not have made that assumption. They probably would not have made any assumption, but done what I should have done and simply introduce myself to the one person I did not know.

What I actually did is an example of what is called implicit bias, a tendency to assume about someone a certain role, or ability or trait solely because of what I have internalized about people in that setting who have that skin color. It is not in the least bit a conscious or intentional act. It is a belief that I have developed without even realizing it, that I have come to simply by living in America and absorbing the many underlying societal messages with which we are surrounded at all times. “I’m not biased against black people,” I insist. Well, maybe I don’t dislike black people, but I am certainly guilty of an implicit bias, of making assumptions about someone based on nothing but skin color. I am pretty certain that I am not hateful. But simply by having absorbed the assumptions of our society, it turns out that I am biased none the less.

Having spoken to many of you over the summer as we read Robin DiAngelo’s book, White Fragility together, I know that some of you struggle to accept the idea that we all harbor implicit bias created by our milieu. Believe me, I didn’t really understand it myself, and since I didn’t see myself as racist, it took me a while to wrap my head around the idea that I harbor an implicit racial bias. You may be in the same place, so let me offer you a non-racial example of implicit bias.

Those of you of a certain age will remember the 1970’s TV show, “All in the Family,” which, for the younger set, was a bitingly funny satire of the life of Archie Bunker, who was a loveable blue-collar white bigot, his wife, Edith, his strongly feminist daughter, Gloria, and his progressively minded son-in-law, Mike. In one episode, Gloria was trying to make a point to her father by asking a riddle. She said, “A man and his son were the only two people in a car which hit a telephone pole. The ambulance quickly took the two of them to the nearest hospital for emergency surgery. Walking into the operating room, the doctor took one look at the child and said, “I can’t operate on him; that boy is my son.” How is this possible?

For those of you born after 1980, the answer is probably laughably obvious. But let me tell you, in the early 1970’s it not only stumped Archie Bunker, it stumped many in the television audience as well. The dad was also injured; how could he be the surgeon? The answer? The doctor was, of course, the boy’s mother. Duh! Why was it so difficult for us to answer? Implicit bias. There weren’t so many female doctors at the time, especially not surgeons. We were conditioned by the messages of our society to hear “doctor” and automatically assume “male,” so there was no way we were going to figure out Gloria’s riddle. At the time there was a general attitude in society, an implicit bias, that women were not surgeons. It’s not that they weren’t technically allowed to be surgeons. It was just a general assumption that it didn’t happen. But let me say that forty years later when I gave my own children the same challenge, they knew the answer instinctively. The only thing that confused them about it was why I presented it to them as a riddle at all. How could anyone not figure that out immediately? Happily, what that tells us is that the implicit biases of our society can in fact be challenged and changed. It may take a long time, but it can be done.

Let’s return to my funeral story. In addition to being an example of implicit bias, my question to the young black woman, whose name I never did learn, was a micro-aggression. It was nothing egregious; it was just a tiny moment. If it were the only time something like that had happened to her, she would likely have laughed off my mistake. But I assure you, it was not the only time something like that happened to her. When I finally had the courage to share this story with some of the black ministers in town, they were not the least bit surprised. Every single one of them had many stories of the times that similar things happened to them. In fact, I am embarrassed to say, I am the one who has been surprised to learn that almost every black American seems to have many stories about this. One of the black ministers told of being a guest at a wedding with mostly white guests. As he was mingling during the cocktail hour, a white woman handed him an empty wine glass and asked him to bring her another drink. Stories like that. Black people tell me that this sort of thing happens to them on a daily basis. No wonder that young woman snapped at me, “I’m not the help.” She faces that kind of implicit bias all the time. I cannot imagine how tiring it must get having to deal with it day in and day out.

You know, I have never been at an airport and been assumed by anyone to be a porter. And I have never been a guest at a wedding where I was assumed to be a waiter. This kind of thing has never, ever happened to me. And I can guarantee that if I were the only white guest at a black wedding, it still wouldn’t happen to me. This is a tiny example of what is referred to as White Privilege. Because of my skin color I have the privilege of never worrying about being assumed to be “the help.” As a white person in America, I have the privilege of going through life without these constant micro-aggressions that wear you down, that tear at your self-image. People of color, and particularly Black people, deal with it every single day.

In an odd way, I am glad that what I know think of as my funeral epiphany happened. I would not be at the point where I am now, finally beginning to understand how deeply I have been influenced, indeed how completely my attitudes have been shaped by the general attitudes of American society, and in particular, our society’s assumptions about race.

A society in which a long-disliked minority is afraid of the official arms of the government. One in which violent action by the police against them is routinely ignored. One in which the blame for that violent action, if it is discussed at all, is put on the minority group for inciting it. To me, this sounds like an accurate description of the current experience of the American black community. But I have to tell you, it also describes the experience of the Jewish community in 1935 Germany. Can you imagine the difference it might have made if ordinary Germans had marched in the streets with their neighbors chanting “Jewish Lives Matter”?

Don’t get angry and send me e-mails. The Holocaust was a unique event. I am not in the slightest bit suggesting a comparison between what is going on now in America with the what eventually happened to our people in the Holocaust. I am saying that if there had been a public outcry that JLM – Jewish lives matter – the German Jewish community would have welcomed it. They would not have welcomed a counter-demonstration claiming “All German Lives Matter.” And this, among many other reasons, is why American Jews need to support Black Lives Matter.

**Of** **course** everyone’s life matters. It ought to go without saying. But when one particular group is being threatened, it can no longer go without saying. Incredibly, in 21st century America, we still need to remind ourselves and our leaders that Black Lives do in fact Matter. We need to repeatedly declare that Black Lives Matter because it is apparent that, in many settings, they **don’t** seem to matter; or at least not to matter as much as white lives. Saying Black Lives Matter does not elevate their lives above anyone else’s. The opposite. We’re just trying to get the care taken with black lives up to the level the rest of us enjoy.

For those of you concerned about anti-Semitism and the pro-Palestinian plank in the Black Lives Matter organization, let me say two things. First, don’t confuse the organization, which is a relatively small group of people, with the movement, which numbers in the millions. No one really understands why the BLM organization diluted their own cause by introducing an extraneous and clearly anti-Semitic reference to Israel and Palestine. Most of the folks who have been part of the demonstrations these past few months don’t know about the plank, and are not particularly concerned with what is happening in the Middle East. They are more worried about their family members are dying in American cities. And second, even if the anti-Israel sentiment were wide spread, American Jews would still have a moral obligation to stand with those whose lives are being snuffed out. As Charles Dunst wrote so eloquently, “While we must [call out anti-Semitism](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/23/us/womens-march-anti-semitism.html) from those we might consider fellow ideological travelers, it would be folly to fixate too intensely on the minority of Black Lives Matter protestors who criticize Israel. Their support for a boycott of the Jewish state**,** while abhorrent to many of us**,** should not be an excuse for white Jews to “[sit this out](https://www.heyalma.com/stop-using-israel-as-an-excuse-to-not-support-black-lives-matter/).” Israel can withstand some limitedrhetorical aggression; Black Americans, on the other hand, cannot be asked to any longer withstand systemic American violence.”

Some of you have been listening to me and are thinking that this position is what you would expect from a rabbi whose social agenda is generally left of center. So I want to call your attention to a Black Lives Matters demonstration that took place on June 7, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Crown Heights is where there have been repeated violent incidents just this year between the black community and the Hasidic community. And yet, when Shavuot ended and they heard of the murder of George Floyd, several Chasidic women, members of the Chabad community, quickly organized a march for that Sunday. Chabad! In the Jewish world, you don’t get much further right than Chabad. While they were hoping for maybe 50 people, well over 100 showed up, carrying signs in English, Hebrew and Yiddish saying things like, “Human decency is a frum value,” “Orthodox Jews for Black Lives Matter,” and “As a Jew I know what it feels like to be afraid. I stand with my black neighbors and community members.”

Support for Black Lives Matters is not a **liberal** Jewish cause; it is simply a **Jewish** cause, spanning the entire gamut of the Jewish community. As one Orthodox Jewish woman wrote, “Solidarity across racial and ethnic lines is never easy. If it was, we’d already be doing it. White supremacy is a much bigger threat to American Jews than BDS is to the state of Israel, but even if it weren’t — even it were not in our self-interest as Jews to stand in solidarity with Black America against hate and bigotry — I would join the protests anyway, because as an observant Jew, I am obligated to do so by the Torah. Because Black people were made in the image of God. Because my Black brother’s blood is calling out from the ground. Because I cannot stand idly by while my Black neighbor’s life is threatened. Because it matters.” [Maayan Belding-Zidon]

There is one more facet to this conversation as it relates to the Jewish community, and that is the enriching presence in our midst of so many Jews of color. In America, white Ashkenazim are the majority of Jews, but around the world Jews come in every color, and the Ashkenazim make up a much smaller percentage. And the percentages are changing in America as well. It is an important topic for another day, but what you need to know right now is that for at least some Black American Jews, the way the rest of American Jewry responds to this moment in American history will have an impact on how comfortable they feel in synagogues going forward. The need for white American Jews to be much more clearly open to and inclusive of Jews of color is a subject whose time has come, and we have a lot of work to do here at TBA. Support of Black Lives Matter is not just support of our neighbors out there; it is also support of Jews in here.

The High Holydays call upon all of us to look honestly inward, to not shy away from the difficult, hidden parts of our being. The only way to fix our flaws, and thus begin to fix the world, is to accept that no matter how old we are we still don’t know everything there is to know about ourselves. I have really only just begun my own journey in uncovering the part I play, even unknowingly, in maintaining an unjust system. Now that my eyes are open, I cannot close them again. I am asking you on this holiest of days to make this journey as well. May the actions of this generation, at this moment in history, lead to an America which finally and proudly fulfills its founding creed, that all are created equal. Amen.