

YK Sermon 5777: Unpacking the Knapsack of Privilege
By Rabbi Megan Brudney

I first moved to Israel in 2010 for my rabbinic school year in Jerusalem. I did not actually know that much about Israel beforehand and strangely enough, I had not expected to like it. I had completely assumed that I would simply plow through my year in Jerusalem and then come back to the U.S. and resume life as normal.

To my surprise, I had the most splendid year—and by then I thought it was so important to continue to live in the epicenter of the Zionist experiment that I chose to stay another year and move to Tel Aviv.

The beginning of that second year was utterly exhausting and demoralizing. Turns out that “being good at Israel” meant something very different when I had my HUC cohort and campus closeby versus when it was just me attempting to make my way in Israeli society. At the beginning of the year I needed a place to live so I went to all of these open houses for shared apartments in Tel Aviv, which is a super competitive housing market. These open houses were cattle calls where tens of prospective renters would try to dazzle the current tenants in order to win the spot. I remember showing up and wandering through aimlessly, watching from the sidelines as all of these native Israelis made connections from school and army, and spoke their perfect, unaccented Hebrew, and laughed at jokes that came way too quickly for me to even understand. There was NO CHANCE I could compete with them. No chance. I spoke fairly good Hebrew—and I do have a pretty good accent for an American—but it was immediately obvious that I had no shot of getting picked amidst a pool of Real Israelis.

At the same time I was looking for an apartment—and thank God I did find one, though certainly not through an open house—life continued to happen. I was having a recurring issue with my knee and needed to set an appointment with a specialist. The phone calls I made to try to find a doctor who accepted my insurance and was seeing new patients somehow took everything out of me and required hours of time to psych myself up and then hours of disappointment afterward if—when—I failed. I was also looking for volunteer work but found that

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I had no idea what Hebrew words to use to construct a proper business email or formal phone call. At times I just sat in my apartment—just sat there—paralyzed by my feelings of powerlessness.

I was still regularly returning to HUC in Jerusalem—which was usually the brightest spot in my week—and around this time I met for coffee with one of my favorite professors who had fled the Soviet Union years before to find a new home and a new life in Israel. I slumped in my chair and told her about all of my trials and tribulations, my suffering and sputtering. She looked at me and smiled brightly. “Maygen—that’s Hebrew for Megan—Maygen, you are like all new *olah chadashah!*” Her diagnosis, which she chirped out with palpable enthusiasm, was that I was like any other new immigrant. And she was right. I *was* just like any new immigrant, any *olah chadashah*, trying to build a new life in a new place with new, different, unfamiliar, unwritten rules.

And that was what lay at the heart of all of my frustrations and failures from that time. For the most notable, memorable time in my life—and possibly even for the *first* time in my life—I suddenly found myself...underprivileged. Yes, underprivileged. At a clear disadvantage. Culturally incompetent. Dependent, at times, on the help of others who could navigate a puzzling system for me.

A famous article by Peggy McIntosh describes privilege as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.”¹ A treasure chest of most anything you might need to get along in any situation. In America, my knapsack is stuffed pretty darn full from growing up in a loving, safe home, a home where we never wanted for anything, from getting a good education, and yes, having light skin—only one of the many facets of privilege. I took my proverbial knapsack to Israel with me—in fact, I take it with me everywhere I go, near and far, whether I want to bring it along or not.

¹<http://www.whiteprivilegeconference.com/resources/06-White-Privilege-Unpacking-the-Invisible-Knapsack.pdf>

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Whether I even *believe* I am bringing it along or not. But when I took it with me to Israel, despite how full it was, I suddenly found that it was missing several incredibly key items. Behavioral codes that explained just how hard you could push in order to navigate Israel's infamous government bureaucracy; an Israeli Defense Force pedigree that helped spark an entire world of personal connections; a reference sheet that listed topics that were appropriate for small talk (or tall talk) and topics that were not.

And still, as an *olah chadashah*, even without those things, I had it so much easier than so many other new immigrants. In addition to the many resources I brought in my knapsack, I also had no shortage of allies IN ISRAEL—my adopted Israeli parents who double-checked and co-signed my apartment leases, helpful friends who had been through it themselves, supportive professors who were more than happy to connect me to people they knew to help me get a foot in the door.

Yet nonetheless, my memories of those months are punctuated by overwhelming feelings of my own impotence, my own shameful inability to accomplish even a seemingly basic task. Standard *olah chadashah* stuff. Or, I discovered, even *olah not-so-chadashah*. I have a cousin who has lived in Israel for years—he's an important university administrator and has been *living Israel* and *living Hebrew* for decades. This cousin of mine has a saying that's half a joke—and half not—and it resonated with me so deeply: as an immigrant, he says, it is impossible to get more than TWO THINGS—two things—accomplished in a day in Israel. But if you do...if you THINK you've gotten ahead and finally figured it out...the next day you must suffer a humiliation. A humiliation! That is the price you have to pay. Because even for him, many years in, with his knapsack full of items he'd brought from America and then topped off with tons of extras he'd subsequently picked up in Israel—sometimes, as a non-native Israeli, he is underprivileged too.

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Because privilege is *context dependent*. In one environment we might feel confident, capable, in charge—but in another we might find ourselves unheard, unseen, unable to function. Neutralized. Neutered.

That’s how I felt. On the HUC campus I was a rabbinic student, beloved by my professors, a future Jewish leader preparing for a lifetime of service to my people. As soon as I stepped off campus, I was busy failing at boarding a bus or doing my best to argue with a taxi driver who cheated me in my sanitized classroom Hebrew, unable to say anything harsher than “you are very, very silly!”

Obviously, this isn’t about Israel—and my second year there was in fact a time of tremendous learning and growth and I’m so thankful for it. It’s about how it felt to be on the other end of a privilege paradigm where I usually sit near the top. How it felt to stand powerless when people dismissed me, *constantly* talked over me, impatiently rolled their eyes at me. Behaviors **I** have surely perpetrated any number of times against people “lower” on the status hierarchy than I am, whether according to gender, race, age, place of birth, socioeconomic status, et cetera. Sadly, I am *quite* positive that I have done the very things that I found so hurtful and demeaning as a new immigrant. Instead of trying to help, to welcome, to use the status I do have to contribute to the proverbial knapsacks of others—I’ve found it much easier to just go about my business. I certainly have never meant to hold anyone down, just like I don’t think the people of Israel conspired to hold me down—but that doesn’t mean I haven’t ever, inadvertently, impeded another person’s path.

Rabbi Avi Killip of Mechon Hadar, a visionary educational institution in New York City, brilliantly uses the language of Talmudic tort law to help explain this accountability gap between what we do and what we think we do². She is applying the argument specifically to race in America but these concepts can pertain to any

² <http://forward.com/opinion/347032/how-studying-talmud-helped-me-understand-racism-in-america/>

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criterion with a status differentiation as well. Rabbi Killip focuses on the Talmudic discourse around the payment of damages done by one's ox. (All too relatable, I know.) She explains how there are three main types of damages committed by oxen, and I'm going to bring you two of them. There's *keren*, which means horn—this refers to purposeful damages inflicted by an angry ox, an ox who uses its horns, *keren*, to gore a person or thing. Next is *regel*, which means leg—this refers to an ox that inflicts harm by simply going about its way in the world, for instance if it was walking (hence, *regel*) and stepped on something in its path, like a piece of pottery, and broke it.

When confronted with the idea that we might be high status group members, and that we might *mistreat* lower status group members, we often jump to the image of *keren*, the horns, the purposeful harming. We know that we're not usually or ever purposely harming others based on socioeconomic status, race, education, sexual orientation, et cetera, so we conclude that we must not, that we could not *possibly* be participating in poor treatment of a lower status group member. No way. But Rabbi Killip pushes us to think harder and consider not just *keren*, but *regel* as well, the principle about the *accidental* harm the ox can do as it simply walks through the world in its oxlike way.

When WE walk through the world—do we notice our own behavior and whom it favors and whom it discredits? I'm going to encourage us, in this moment, to think not tall—but small. Think about small actions that subtly convey power, or lack thereof. For example: When we're on the sidewalk and see ourselves on a collision course with another person, who moves first? When we're in a conversation, who is the interrupter and who is the interruptee? These small behaviors set a clear tone for how we value ourselves—and others—in this world. And even though we might not MEAN to exclude or domineer, perhaps these *small* ways we walk in the world make others feel...*smaller*. And to be clear, these questions apply no matter where we find *ourselves* on the multi-faceted hierarchy: for example, research shows that just as men interrupt women more

than other men, so do *women* interrupt *women* more than they interrupt men.³ No matter where we are in the hierarchy, we are still susceptible to enforcing it if we don't actively work to do better.

And while I've now repeated *several* times *several* of the criteria in our status hierarchy...you might notice I've left out one salient determinant: religion. And perhaps that's the most relatable one of all in this room. As Jews, and people who love them, maybe our Judaism has been an asset that we can grab out of our knapsack. That's one reality. Or, perhaps, we've experienced the ugliness of when being Jewish is a liability. That is a reality as well. When being Jewish is not an *additional* item in your knapsack but rather the *absence* of essential playbooks, keys, and passwords. Although it was more overt and socially acceptable in the past, discrimination against Jews of course still exists. Whether personally, painfully—or through the heartbreaking stories of others, I'm sure we all know of a time when preserving the hierarchy meant keeping Jews out. This did not *necessarily* imply the personal animus of *keren* but certainly did involve walking in the world with no objection to limiting others' access to what you had. Maintaining your status meant not letting others get anywhere near it.

But Jews found ways to manage. Let's take the example of limitations on the kind of work American Jews were able to secure. Some Jews found their way around restrictions by seeking employment not in entrenched, established industries—but rather in new ones where they could serve as pioneers and they could set the rules, such as movies or the garment business.⁴ Jews could therefore start from scratch and build their own networks without depending on the help of others.

Other Jews of this era succeeded by *finding allies* in the field of their choice. Take academia. Jewish professors faced an incredibly hard road—but as a leading

³ <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/03/19/google-chief-blasted-for-repeatedly-interrupting-female-government-official/>

⁴ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010) pg. 33.

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Jewish sociologist states, “in this early generation, one invariably finds that those Jews who managed to secure academic posts had the strong backing of...a sponsor.” These sponsors were wealthy non-Jews who would vouch for them, acting as conduits to create opportunities where previously there were none⁵. These sponsors could even save Jewish professors’ jobs when, depressingly frequently, they found themselves in hot water.

These two strategies—two of many—that underprivileged Jews employed decades ago are totally replicable for any group that lacks privilege now. And note that neither strategy involved holding up people who couldn’t cut it—even in a mostly-Jewish network, a “producer” who couldn’t make movies would not survive. And surely no wealthy patron stuck his neck out for a Jewish professor whose scholarly work was unremarkable. In fact, no doubt that Jewish professor’s work had to be *doubly remarkable* to even get noticed in the first place. But in both cases, Jews and non-Jews found ways to deposit more items in the Jewish knapsack.

And so, if we find ourselves in a position of privilege, as I know that I sure do—so can we contribute to others. We can actively participate in making sure that our *regel*, the way we walk in the world, builds up people at any kind of disadvantage instead of bringing them down. For people like the pioneering Jews who envisioned their own new system, we can seek out innovators in search of a clientele. We can show our support with our dollars and patronize companies, businesses, restaurants, movies, and shows owned and produced by people who represent us or represent our values. We can provide advertising, however small, by spreading the word, sharing on Facebook and retweeting. We can hold up their work and become part of their successes.

⁵ Feuer, Lewis S. "The Stages in the Social History of Jewish Professors in American Colleges and Universities." *American Jewish History* 71, no. 4 (1982): 432-65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23882556>.

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And if we ourselves have a platform of power, we can act as those university sponsors did and showcase and promote the work of people who have had less opportunity. One of my favorite examples of this is on Late Night with Seth Meyers on NBC. The show has a recurring segment called Jokes Seth Can't Tell. As Seth explains in the intro, as a straight white man, there are some jokes that just don't sound right coming from him. So he brings out two of his writers, a black woman and a gay woman *who identify themselves as such* as part of the shtick, and *they* get to tell *their* jokes on national TV. Seth does not *have* to employ a diverse team of writers, nor does he *have* to give them airtime on his show—yet at least occasionally, he chooses to use his stage to help give them exposure as well. (Also, they're really funny! *He wouldn't do it if they weren't!*) Even if *you* do not have a nightly show on a major network, and if you do I would sure be interested in speaking to you—you nonetheless might have a stage in your workplace or home where you can be a sponsor and amplify the voice of a person who has been historically unheard or underheard. You can change your *regel*, your walk in the world, to walk *with* underrepresented people instead of walking *right by them*.

In my two years in Israel I got just the tiniest, most laughable sense of the sting of being underprivileged—even amidst the massive privilege I carried in my knapsack. Our Jewish history carries with it the weight of being scorned, ignored, excluded, and harmed. We identify with that pain, whether personally or second-hand. But when we do find ourselves in a position of advantage—we *can* choose behaviors that reinforce the hierarchy. Behaviors that recreate the dark days that were visited on our parents or grandparents by others who wanted to protect what they thought was theirs and theirs alone. Or we can choose behaviors that undercut the hierarchy: changing our *regel* and supporting pioneers and sharing our platform with people who are still living that struggle that we know so well. In 5777 I hope you will open your knapsack and take a long, honest look at what's inside—and I hope that you will take the things you realize you actually don't

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need anymore and do the incredible mitzvah of passing them along to someone who needs them badly. AMEN