**WHITE FRAGILITY**

**Rosh Hashanah Day One, 5776 – 2015**

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FRAGILITY. RACE. US.

“Fragile: Handle With Care.” Though stamped on boxes, it should be stamped on people; on foreheads, where we can’t miss it. You see them, and you’re reminded, they’re fragile. Look in the mirror, and remember, you are too.

Being human, mortal, *is* fragility – all get sick, all die – some, painfully early; some, painfully. In this season of teshuvah (as always), we must balance that fragility with the strength, the resilience, that thankfully is also within us.

The goal of these High Holy Days is to reverse sin – **repent, and sin no more** (or sin less, at least!).  This takes strengthening of will, of our moral fabric.  And just as one mitzvah begets another (*Mitzvah Goreret Mitzvah*),[[1]](#footnote-1) as goodness snowballs – so this show of strength of DOING tshuvah, strengthens us further, in turn. But even at our strongest, we remain fragile in our improvements, capable of backsliding, knowing we could always do more.

There’s a particular kind of fragility, though, I’ve noted lately, one that’s an especially potent stumbling-block to tshuvah: call it the fragility of self-concept.

It’s the difficulty we have seeing and accepting our flaws. It’s rooted in our ‘illusion of superiority, or superiority bias’ (also known as the ‘Lake Wobegon effect’), in which we overestimate our own goodness—or the above-average nature of our children! -- and underestimate our foibles.[[2]](#footnote-2)

[mock protest voice]: “Don’t tell me that I, or my group, my society, is somehow defective!”

Accused, or presented with evidence, we get defensive. We rationalize; shift topics; shift blame; invoke familiar alternative narratives; do mental gymnastics to avoid acknowledging what might undermine our esteemed self-concept. We obfuscate, even lie to ourselves, to preserve that illusory sense of superiority (or acceptability). In so doing, we **miss the mark** on tshuvah. We fail at tshuvah’s first step, introspection: and thus neither repent, nor improve.

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How to get past this fragility of self-concept? Consider this: “**We are not good *despite* our imperfections; it is the connection we maintain *with* our imperfections that *allows* us to be good**.” Deep. Maimonides? Freud? No, Smooth – Jay Smooth – hip hop DJ, vid-blogger, and trenchant social commentator.[[3]](#footnote-3) Again: “We are not good despite our imperfections; it is the connection we maintain with our imperfections that allows us to be good.”

*That’s* a High Holy Day message: Bravely name your flaws; drop ‘em in the river at tashlich. Catalog those sins; highlight those shortcomings. We’re *not* perfect, and won’t be. But to get *closer* toward perfection, *face* our **im**perfections, then transcend them.

Smooth riffs on owning what we might not see: think “of being a *good* person” as “you think of being a *clean* person…. something you maintain and work on every day… when someone suggests that we’ve got something stuck in our teeth we don’t say, “what do you mean, I have something stuck in my teeth? I’m a clean person!”

It’s funny, and spot-on, about the human psyche. But Smooth addresses a very particular arena – one we ignore at our peril – a focal point of renewed concern, and a call for true teshuvah – the subject of race.

Race, Smooth says, is like a dance partner designed to trip us up. Old racial ideas, which once ‘justified’ terrible behavior toward other human beings, pass down through society, and take root in *our* unconscious. That dance partner continues its evil footwork to this day. And it’s very hard to talk about – we so want to feel consistently good in this regard; we’re each reluctant to admit what residual racism remains: in me, my police force, my nation.

“You will never bat a thousand when dealing with race issues,” says Smooth.  “The problem with that all-or-nothing binary, is that it causes us to look at racism and prejudice…akin to having tonsils – you either have tonsils or you don’t – ...and if someone says “I think you may have a little unconscious prejudice” – you say, ‘no, my prejudice was removed in 2005’!” Yet “many things in our day-to-day lives…cause us to build up little pockets of prejudice every day, just like plaque develops on our teeth.  So we need to move away from the tonsils paradigm of race discourse, toward the dental hygiene paradigm of race discourse.”

Connecting the dots, Smooth exhorts: “shift away from taking it as an indictment of our goodness, and move towards taking it as a gesture of respect and an act of kindness, when someone tells us that we’ve got something racist stuck in our teeth.”

It’s a real phenomenon: defensiveness and disbelief around the pockets of prejudice we all carry. Connecting *our* dots, social scientist and educator Dr. Robin DiAngelo[[4]](#footnote-4) recently named it: “**white fragility**.”

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I learned this term recently from my wife Minna – who’s often a step (or two!) ahead of me in thinking about race – a focus of her activist, and our shared family, life. It resonated deeply.

White fragility: living in cognitive dissonance, vaguely aware that whiteness grants us privilege undeserved, yet so unready to give it up that we deny there’s a problem, or downplay it at least  Again: we rationalize; shift blame; invoke familiar, alternative narratives ( ‘I support civil rights so I couldn’t have really offended them;’ ‘those who wear our uniform must have had their reasons;’…) – and generally get very uncomfortable.

Such discomfort and denial become their own problem, the solution to which (suggests blogger Courtney Martin) is to “show up as bold and genuine and **im**perfect” -- knowing that as we transform our fragility, it’s “the beginning of a lot more joy.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

All these resources and quotes, by the way, are in your handout, page 2 – for your further reflection, just as a coalition of Jewish groups have asked synagogues to prominently post the #blacklivesmatter graphic at these High Holy Days – to help us reflect – aware that we often turn too quickly from confronting our own, and our society’s, racial failings. Those failings are legion, and they implicate us, as Heschel’s White House telegram[[6]](#footnote-6) makes plain. **We** have real work to do.

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But in this diverse room, who’s “**we**,” kimosabi?! Let’s explore:

One strand of defensiveness, partly true but oft overstated, is that Jews -- Ashkenazim, that is -- are not *exactly* white. Yes, **we**’ve often been “other” in the eyes of America’s earliest gentry – but in time, most of our ancestors, and then we, “passed” as White, accruing the privileges of whiteness, the benefits of not being brown in America.  Yes, few of ***our*** ancestors directly profited from slavery or Jim Crow – but the *in*direct benefit across all who present as white continues to enrich most of **us**, at the expense of those with darker skin.  As Heschel famously said, “in a free society, some are guilty; all are responsible.” Let’s not get defensive – not fall prey to “*Ashkenazic* fragility!”

Hear the title of anthropologist Karen Brodkin Sacks’ book: *How Jews Became White Folks, And What That Says About Race In America*. In fact, many of **us** *have* benefited from ‘becoming white.” She reminds us: not long ago, the "GI Bill, and FHA and VA mortgages, were forms of affirmative action that [explicitly favored…] Euro-American men,” including white Jewish men, leaving African Americans further behind. I’d add, even today’s home mortgage interest deductions functions for many in that same way, still. “White privilege” is an accurate, if discomfiting, term for such benefits **we** enjoy. “White advantage,” softer, may at times be more effective.[[7]](#footnote-7) Either term *does* apply to most American Jews.

For Rabbi Michael Rothbaum, history begets empathy – shared experiences of slavery, and joint struggles toward civil rights, yes, but also a shared sense of exclusion. He retells, from just a hundred years ago, race riots against Jews, screeds from the New York City Police Commissioner against criminal tendencies in “the Hebrew Race.” Rothbaum writes: “In the *Unetaneh Tokef*, we say of God: *Tizkor kol-haNishkachot*.  “You remember everything we’ve forgotten.”  Have **we** [Ashkenazi-Americans] forgotten our history as genetic scapegoats?”[[8]](#footnote-8)

To be clear, scripture *insists* that comparatively privileged folks look out for those structurally *dis*empowered -- the marginal ones in land which “**we**” occupy and help govern. The Other, the stranger, the *ger* – often people of color (and immigrants, as Leon Rodrigeuz so poignantly shared in his dvar Torah, earlier). “Don’t oppress the *ger*; love the *ger*.”  Don’t abuse slaves, *you* were slaves… and when you set slaves free, don’t leave them empty-handed.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Most of ***us*** *are* descendants of slaves – in ancient Egypt; and for *some* of us, right here, in this country, this *county*, 150 years ago. Of course “**we**” are not all Ashkenazic; not all born Jewish; not all Jewish. “We” include many people of color, Jews of color: that’s one more reason why #blacklivesmatter is inherently a Jewish, a synagogue,[[10]](#footnote-10) an Adat Shalom priority. That’s where Jared Jackson’s “Pitfalls To Avoid [as] Ally to Jews of Color” come in handy.[[11]](#footnote-11) Summarized on your handout, Jackson clues white Jews in on how to be true reflective allies, not fragile defensive ones.

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Having complexified the “we”, Robin DiAngelo, coiner of “White Fragility,” outlines how those of us who pass as white can do tshuvah -- not just around our role in racist realities, but via that very ‘fragility’ which, unchecked, impedes our ability to do tshuvah at all. Quote:

“The antidote to white fragility is on-going and life-long… sustained engagement, **humility**, and education. We can begin by:

* [a] Being willing to tolerate the discomfort associated with an honest appraisal and discussion of our internalized superiority [our implicit bias] and racial privilege.
* [b] Challenging our own racial reality by acknowledging ourselves as racial beings with a particular and limited perspective on race.
* [c] Attempting to understand the racial realities of people of color through authentic interaction rather than through the media or unequal relationships.
* [and d,] Taking action to address our own racism, the racism of other whites, and the racism embedded in our institutions—e.g., get educated and act.

[she continues:] “Getting it” when it comes to race and racism challenges our very identities as good white people. It’s an ongoing and often painful process of seeking to uncover our socialization at its very roots. It asks us to rebuild this identity in new and often uncomfortable ways. But [she concludes,] I can testify that it is also the most exciting, powerful, intellectually stimulating and emotionally fulfilling journey...”[[12]](#footnote-12)

So it should be – exciting, powerful, fulfilling – when we grapple with any form of privilege, any structural imbalance, and **do** something about it!

That includes male privilege, for half of us: how much space *should* we take up?! Class privilege, for most of us: how much of what’s ‘ours’ do we truly deserve, and what to do with the rest? Industrialized global north privilege: how much carbon ‘can’ we emit? Straight privilege, able-bodied privilege, and so on. They’re hard to tackle: “patriarchy fragility,” “bourgeois fragility,” “big-climate-footprint fragility” – we’ll manifest them all.[[13]](#footnote-13) But how exciting, powerful, and fulfilling – how tshuvahdik, in the spirit of this season – it can be, to free ourselves, become enlightened, and begin to *act* accordingly.

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There’s one more text on your handout (page 2, number 7, 3rd paragraph) – Deuteronomy, *‘Cut away the thickening [orlah] about your hearts’* – to which Sforno, an early Renaissance Italian Torah commentator with a very rational bent, comments: *“Therefore, it’s fitting that you remove the thickening of your intelligence, by examining and eliminating the errors which give birth to false ideas.  And stiffen your necks no more… Remove the stiffness of your neck, which prevents you from turning to that which is proper…”[[14]](#footnote-14)*

It continues (sorry that the final words and attribution didn’t prit!) from Rabbi Noah Arnow of St Louis: “There’s so much to trim away—the imprints of white privilege and unconscious racism, the myth that we are a colorblind society, the knee jerk towards #AllLivesMatter, when we need to proclaim and reaffirm #BlackLivesMatter…”

*Of course* all lives matter. But after Staten Island, Ferguson, Baltimore – “I can’t breathe, don’t shoot, rough ride” – after Charleston – we *must* transcend our white fragility.

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I love Sforno’s image – “the stiffness of your neck, which prevents you from turning to that which is proper.” Which prevents you from turning, from doing tshuvah. We just need a good neck massage, some physical therapy – make our necks a bit more supple, and flexible, with a wider range of motion! What a difference that’ll make.

We ARE the *am k’shei oref*, stiff-necked-people. But we don’t have to be. Let’s summon the strength and courage to turn our necks, to see what we’ve too often missed in every department – to do tshuvah; to change. To brush that residual racism out of our teeth, and out of our society.

So what *will* we do differently?  With those of color near us, lest our moments of purse-clutching or street-crossing[[15]](#footnote-15) or ‘do-you-really-belong-here,’ further perpetuate racism’s legacy?  With structures in which we’re complicit? With the global south?  With climate, and its disproportionate impacts on people of color and the poor?  What will we do with our tzedakah, our votes, our voices?  Think; introspect. Then commit – and follow-through.  This is tshuvah.

It starts here, with us, to be more strong, and supple, than fragile. To be strong *by* being vulnerable, by admitting hard truths to ourselves, and helping others do the same.

It starts now, with these High Holy Days, remembering that Smooth wisdom: “We are not good *despite* our imperfections; it is the connection we maintain *with* our imperfections that *allows* us to be good.”

  May 5776 be a *good* year, for **all** of us.  Shanah Tovah.

1. Ben Azai, in Mishnah (or Pirkei) Avot, 4:2. [for no obvious reason, Word wouldn’t allow notes ‘a,’ ‘c,’ or ‘h’!] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vera Hoorens, 1993, as cited on Wikipedia.org’s “List of Cognitive Biases” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU> – Jay Smooth [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Robin DiAngelo, in [The International Journal of Critical Commentary 3:3 (2011),](http://libjournal.uncg.edu/index.php/ijcp/article/view/249) the abstract of which is: “White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.”  (See also articles quoting DiAngelo such as “[why-white-people-freak-out-when-theyre-called-out-about-race](http://www.alternet.org/culture/why-white-people-freak-out-when-theyre-called-out-about-race)” and “[white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism](http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism-twlm/)”) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “If white people want to belong to the beloved community, if we want to be part of the tide that is turning thanks to people of color-led movements like [#BlackLivesMatter](https://twitter.com/hashtag/BlackLivesMatter), then we have to show up as bold and genuine and imperfect.  We have to be weary of our fragility.  We have to be intolerant of our own forgetfulness. If it feels difficult, and it does to me, you’re probably on the right track.  Dismantling centuries of dehumanizing institutions and practices — both in the world and within ourselves — can’t be a simple process.  The good news is that transforming your fragility into courageous imperfection is the beginning of a lot more joy.  It’s the beginning of a lot more connection.  It’s the beginning of the end of racism.”  (Courtney Martin, [OnBeing.org,](http://www.onbeing.org/blog/transforming-white-fragility-into-courageous-imperfection/7701?utm_source=On+Being+Newsletter&utm_campaign=8601cff829-20150704_bela_fleck_Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1c66543c2f-8601cff829-69840781) 6/26/15) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “TO PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, THE WHITE HOUSE, JUNE 16, 1963. I LOOK FORWARD TO PRIVILEGE OF BEING PRESENT AT MEETING TOMORROW AT 4 P.M. LIKELIHOOD EXISTS THAT NEGRO PROBLEM WILL BE LIKE THE WEATHER. EVERYBODY TALKS ABOUT IT BUT NOBODY DOES ANYTHING ABOUT IT. **PLEASE DEMAND OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT NOT JUST SOLEMN DECLARATION. WE FORFEIT THE RIGHT TO WORSHIP GOD AS LONG AS WE CONTINUE TO HUMILIATE NEGROES. CHURCHES SYNAGOGUES HAVE FAILED. THEY MUST REPENT. ASK OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO CALL FOR NATIONAL REPENTANCE AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE. LET RELIGIOUS LEADERS DONATE ONE MONTH’S SALARY TOWARD FUND FOR NEGRO HOUSING AND EDUCATION.** I PROPOSE THAT YOU MR. PRESIDENT DECLARE STATE OF MORAL EMERGENCY. A MARSHALL PLAN FOR AID TO NEGROES IS BECOMING A NECESSITY. THE HOUR CALLS FOR HIGH MORAL GRANDEUR AND SPIRITUAL AUDACITY. Abraham Joshua Heschel”.    (see <http://jwa.org/media/telegram-from-abraham-joshua-heschel-to-president-john-f-kennedy-june-16-1963>) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This suggestion comes from my sister-in-law Heather Martens, director of ProtectMinnesota.org, striving to maintain a central place for racial justice within the broader movement to prevent gun violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rabbi Michael Rothbaum, at <http://rabbicreditor.blogspot.com/2014/10/rabbi-michael-rothbaum-fergusonfargesn.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This biblical reference of what to do upon manumitting slaves brings us to the murky but sacred waters of the debate over reparations, ala Ta Nehisi Coates (in *The Atlantic* 2014) – topic for another sermon, or shiur, or semester. For now, let us simply stay open, and in the frame of values, around that key ongoing social conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Blogger and Jew-of-Color activist Ma Nishtana just wrote a remarkable piece on this, hours before this holiday. Highly recommended, eye-opening: <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/193507/high-holiday-safety-for-jews-of-color-in-nyc?utm_source=tabletmagazinelist&utm_campaign=3cbdf797a1-Sunday_September_13_20159_11_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c308bf8edb-3cbdf797a1-206646070>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 8 Pitfalls To Avoid When Being an Ally to Jews of Color -- Jared Jackson, 31 Aug 2015, [forward.com](http://forward.com/opinion/319787/8-pitfalls-to-avoid-when-being-an-ally-to-a-jew-of-color/#ixzz3kPaMpYyE) (abridged)

    When it comes to Jews of color, allies are *definitely* needed.  But if you want to be an effective ally, there are important things to consider before, during and after the process.  If not properly considered, some of these things will lead to major pitfalls.

    ##### 1. “It’s all about me!”   We have to be careful as to which space is actually ours for the taking.

    ##### 2. “Hey, oppressed people, let me teach you about how you’re oppressed.”   This one happens to me *so* many times in a week.

    ##### 3. “I’m the expert.”   Granted, there are definitely allies who know a great deal.  But for the most part, when you [step forward as an ally] for the media or the general public, you’ve just alienated yourself from a cause by becoming the spokesperson through privilege.  In taking the “expert” role, you could be limiting the ability of all parties to build a sustainable framework that leads to understanding. I’m not saying that there shouldn’t be a space for white people to talk about race — that’s extremely important. But if you end up in this role, make sure to directly connect the group with the actual experts. That would *really* make you an effective ally.

    ##### 4. “I’m giving you a voice.”   When you host a speaker, donate to a cause or bring attention to the issues of another and say, “I gave them a voice,” in fact, you’re perpetuating the white savior complex, which is fraught with unchecked biases.

    ##### 5. “I posted on Facebook — look at my amazing activism!”   You must interact with real people, in person, so that you get to understand the nuance of some situations.

    ##### 6. “You’re my Google, right?”   Before turning to us, ask yourself: Have I made an effort to seek out resources myself?

    ##### 7. “I can be a great ally by myself.”   Simply put: No, you can’t. Thinking this will lead you to pitfalls 1–6.  Also, you’ll need to set up a support system

    ##### 8. “I’m going to be a great ally. All. The. Time.”   If you’re going to become an ally, you have to make uprooting your personal bias a life-long journey.  Being a great ally means that you hold yourself accountable for your part in bias.  Everybody has a part, and we all need to own that.

    As you’re going through this process, be patient with yourself.   And remember that even though you may fall, it’s not the end.  We still need you! [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Robin DiAngelo, interviewed, at <http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism-twlm/#sthash.LTYzTGq1.dpuf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. To amplify this: When we stay within white fragility, remaining defensive instead of open to growth, that’s taking the easy way out – and it’s definitely *not* the Jewish way. “*Zu shver zayn a Yid*, it’s tough to be a Jew,” said our Ashkenazi immigrant ancestors, and not just about the outside world: it’s tough to always have to think, and question, and challenge.  Yes – and try being of color! – “*zu shver zayn black in America*”.  They’re true independently, and true together.  [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sforno on Deuteronomy 10:16, selected by Rabbi Noah Arnow, shared in T’ruah.org email, early September 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See President Obama’s July 2013 speech, after the Trayvon Martin decision:

    "There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me.     There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me -- at least before I was a senator.      There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often..."

    At Yom Kippur that year, after quoting this, Rabbi Bob Gluck (as posted to RRAnet 7/26/15) shared a powerful alternative Al Chet prayer, which included these lines:

    “Al het shekhatanu l'fanekha, for the sin that we sinned against You: We have locked our car doors when driving in African American neighborhoods We have clutched our purses when black men enter an elevator We have treated black men with suspicion when they enter stores in which we work

    Al het shekhatanu l'fanekha, for the sin that we sinned against You: We have turned our eyes when we meet young black men on the street We have crossed the street when we see black me approaching We have emulated black male entertainers, sports heroes, and musicians, but suspect their children…” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)