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Privilege, Perspective, and Modern Orthodox Youth

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My qualifications for discussing this topic are experiential rather than academic. I have no particular expertise in *tikkun olam* or the relationship between Jews and the broader world. My academic training is in the history of science. I have been teaching Modern Orthodox high school students for seven years, teaching American history with a distinct social history emphasis at a school that encourages the Grand Conversation—drawing connections between disciplines, between Torah and all other areas, between our learning and our lives. And in doing so, I have made some observations—about who our students are, and who they are not, when it comes to relating to the broader world. I will share those observations, discussing both the psychological phenomena that underlie, as well as the American history that belies, some of their assumptions about their place in the world and how they have gotten there. And finally, this paper will begin to sketch out how we might move our students past those facile assumptions to a more nuanced understanding.

This session was framed by a series of questions, including one about how well prepared our students are to function in the broader non-Jewish world. My students have no difficulty whatsoever functioning in the broader non-Jewish world. The modern American cultural and social milieu is one they inhabit fully and with perfect comfort. Whenever I ask my students whether they feel that they are more fundamentally like a non-Jewish Horace Mann student a few blocks away or a hasidic teenager in Williamsburg, they invariably tell me that they are much more like a non-Jewish prep school student whose concerns and pressing issues are most similar to their own than they are to their fellow Orthodox Jew. (That raises a different issue, perhaps the topic for another Forum, but it indicates that my students have no difficulty identifying and feeling comfortable with the non-Jewish world.)

As long, that is, as that non-Jewish world is like them: largely white, upper middle class (at least), focused on college admissions and acceptances as the greatest challenges of teenage life. The question is not, then, whether our Modern Orthodox high school students are prepared to engage with the non-Jewish world. It is whether they are prepared to engage without condescension (or at best, a sense of the white man's burden) with those who come from culturally and, more importantly, socio-economically dissimilar backgrounds.

To the extent that most of our students encounter the reality of poverty, it is in the framework of *hesed* activities.¹ At SAR High School, students can, through the advisory *hesed* program, spend a few hours at a food pantry or a soup kitchen in New York City. While this may help raise their awareness of the problem of hunger even in this wealthy city in this wealthiest country in the world, it exacerbates, rather than eliminates, their sense of distance from the people they are helping. We do not, after all, see ourselves in the patrons of the JCC of Washington Heights and Inwood's food pantry. Some of my high school students participate in *hesed* activities that have them traveling to a far corner of the globe to do charitable work among disadvantaged populations. In this mode, too—as the white Westerners helping the poor people of color—they are inhabiting a role that does not push them to discomfiting examinations of privilege, class, race, and justice.²

I have no interest in bashing “kids these days.” I don’t think that there is any new flaw of character separating today’s teenagers from the armies of teens that came before them. But our kids are, overall, better off than, and therefore more distant from, those who struggle to meet their most basic needs. These are not the Jewish kids of the 1930s, attending CCNY, the poor man’s Harvard, and debating Trotsky in the cafeteria. These are students groomed at least from ninth grade for their eventual entry into the Ivy League and thence, the white-shoe law firms and investment banks that are now the markers of a successful Modern Orthodox life.³ The more cushioned their lives are from the harsh realities of the struggle for survival, the more challenging it becomes for them to make the imaginative leap to seeing oneself in another’s position that is the prerequisite for empathy.

And being successful creates a powerful psychological dynamic that further distances those who have from those who do not, and which makes that empathy all the more difficult to achieve. We desire, indeed we need, to see our success as the product of our own efforts and achievements, rather than our good fortune. It is this phenomenon that Jim Hightower was pointing to when he mocked then-President George H.W. Bush as “someone who was born on third base and thinks he hit a triple.” Jews have, as a community, enjoyed great success in the economic, social, cultural, and political realms. A full accounting of the reasons for the success of Jews as a group would include a powerful immigrant work ethic, an intense emphasis on education as a means of advancement, and a fierce commitment to “making it” (which became the title of Norman Podhoretz’s book describing just such a trajectory).⁴

But the balance sheet would also have to include that along the way we have been the beneficiaries of certain broader patterns in American life, which have helped enable Jewish immigrant populations to achieve success. That success is then compounded through the succeeding generations. (A family with assets can provide its children with the opportunities and the start-up capital that will enable them to amass still more. A Jewish boy who got into Columbia University in the 1960s not only made good for himself, he made it that much easier for his children to secure their own coveted berths in the Ivy League.)

We may not have established these patterns, or gotten to choose our roles in the American pageant, but we have benefited from them all the same.⁵

We do not like hearing that. None of us, having achieved success in whatever realm, wants to think that it was the product of the circumstances that set us up for success, as much as it was our smarts, hard work, and brilliant application essay. And once we take sole credit for our own achievements, that in turn inclines us to see those who have not succeeded similarly as deficient and therefore responsible for their own failure. Social psychologists have described as the fundamental error of attribution our tendency to overweigh the importance of character traits and attitudes, and undervalue the importance of circumstances, in assessing others' behavior. When it comes to our own, on the other hand, we take credit for our successes but attribute our failures to outside forces beyond our control, a phenomenon known as the self-serving bias.⁶ Taken together, these tendencies play out in successful people taking credit for their own success and blaming the less successful for their plight. Besides being a fundamentally human inclination, this is also a profoundly American one—our desire to confirm our national mythology about Horatio Alger stories, bootstraps-up-pulling, and every individual's ability to make it, if only he or she works hard enough and is smart enough.

Why do we think this way, even in the face of clear evidence that circumstance, rather than individual choice, is a significant factor? One answer that psychologists offer, which seems highly relevant to this case, is our desire to see the world as just.⁷ In a just world, good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to people who have it coming to them. To make sense of our world, we want to impose order and rationality (which justice provides) on it, which is why we find *zaddik ve-ra lo* (the suffering of the righteous) so fundamentally disturbing. I would further suggest that there is another phenomenon at work here when we are on the fortunate end of the equation. Rather than see our good fortune as arbitrary and unearned, which might then force us to think in uncomfortable ways about those who are less fortunate than we are through no fault of their own, viewing our good

fortune and their lack thereof as a function of our being better, smarter, harder-working justifies why we are in the position that we are in, and protects us from unsettling thoughts about those who are less well off.

This tendency to ascribe to skill or commitment that which is at least in part attributable to luck and circumstance is the subject of Malcolm Gladwell's recent book *Outliers*.⁸ Gladwell details the extent to which, in fields as disparate as the Canadian Junior Hockey League and the founding of technology companies, circumstances, if they do not enable the individual's success, at least then provide the cultural medium in which it can grow and flourish. The point, supported by a range of examples, is that success is not solely a product of inspiration and perspiration. There are other factors that create the environment in which one person's inspiration and perspiration yield the exceptional results that others' hard work and creativity don't. In junior hockey, the other factor turns out to be having a birthday in the first three months of the year, ensuring that the player will be somewhat older, more developed, more coordinated than his age-group peers. That advantage gets him more attention from the coaches, which, if coupled with innate ability and hard work, yields an even better player, who in turn gets even more extra attention and coaching.⁹ When it comes to technology start-ups, while we are in thrall to a story about lone-genius college dropouts in their garages developing products and ideas that revolutionize the market, Gladwell traces the impact of early access to computers, and institutional and familial support, that enabled the lone geniuses to put in the thousands of hours of programming time that they needed to develop their talent.¹⁰ The point is the same. People do not achieve great success because they are hardworking and smart. They achieve great success because they are hardworking, smart—and lucky.

To support my assertion that Jews have benefited from some broader developments in American life that similarly created an environment conducive to nurture their hard work and creativity, I will discuss some examples from the general patterns of economic development in the twentieth-century United States. This is the period during which the newly arrived European Jews established themselves,

made it, and moved out to the suburbs. Then I will examine at some length the specific case of college admissions as the most relevant example in the lives of my students.

While Jewish Americans were achieving the American dream in the twentieth century, African Americans consistently lagged behind. African American households have accumulated far less wealth, on average, than white households. This disparity plays out all across American life—whatever an African American family's income, it is likely to have far less in assets than a white family with the same income. The psychological phenomena described above would incline us to see this as a story of hard work, merit, and just deserts.

But a close examination of the history tells a different story. Up through at least the middle of the twentieth century, the government of the United States and various American institutions pursued economic policies that benefited whites and largely excluded African Americans. It was the Jews' good fortune that by this point in history, they were positioned in a way to be able to benefit from that largesse.¹¹ Two recent books by American historians, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, by Ira Katznelson,¹² and *A Consumers' Republic*, by Lizabeth Cohen,¹³ address how the legal and governmental structures that were created during the mid-twentieth century served to perpetuate and actually increase the socioeconomic gap between African Americans and whites in the United States. Contrary to our popular assumptions about the intent and effect of both the New Deal and the G.I. Bill, they were not intended to, nor did they, provide all poor Americans with equal economic opportunity.

Thus, the current tenfold disparity in assets between white and African American families making comparable incomes, as documented by Katznelson,¹⁴ is not something that simply came to be or had to happen, but was the product of conscious choices made by government officials. In the case of the New Deal, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt bowed to the reality of a governing coalition that included the segregationist and racist Democrats of the Solid South, who agreed to the legislation establishing Social Security on the condition that it explicitly exclude domestic and agricultural workers, thus leaving most African American workers out of its benefits.¹⁵ Later,

when the G.I. Bill was passed to enable veterans of World War II to ascend to the middle class, the administration of these benefits, such as subsidized college education and mortgages, was left to the various states and private entities. The federal government's willingness to fund an African American veteran's education was meaningless if he could not find a college in which to enroll, as was its willingness to guarantee his mortgage if no bank would lend to him because of redlining.¹⁶ This history of the middle of the twentieth century becomes a history of many white Americans climbing up the socioeconomic ladder by a governmental framework that created the environment in which their hard work would be leveraged to greater advantage. African Americans enjoyed no such leveraging, and the effects of that, compounded through the generations, continue to be seen in American life.

Shifting our analytic lens from race to socioeconomic class, we turn to the specific case of college admissions. The history of college admissions is particularly fraught in regard to the question of earned and unearned advantage, and one in which I think it is particularly important that my students come to see that they may be the beneficiaries of a history of which they were unaware. This history tilts the playing field to their benefit before they even step onto it. In the early twentieth century, the elite American universities were bastions of white Anglo-Saxon privilege. But when too many strivers—particularly Jewish strivers—began applying for and earning admission, the universities instituted policies explicitly intended to bar Jewish applicants. As Jerome Karabel describes in his recent book about the history of admissions policies at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, many aspects of the college application that are meant to get beyond mere numbers or grades to reveal the deeper character of the applicant were in fact instituted in the early twentieth century to weed out the Jews. Hence the letter of recommendation, the interview, the more detailed application questions. They would serve, first, to help the colleges identify the Jews and, second, to provide a pretext for denying them admission.¹⁷

This situation obtained until the years around World War II, when under the guidance of its progressive president James Bryant Conant, Harvard University revamped its admissions process to

make it more meritocratic (though, as Karabel notes, the “character” elements of the application remain central parts of the college application process today). Central to that effort—Conant’s desire to identify what Thomas Jefferson termed the “natural aristocracy” of the most capable and talented, and to provide them with the benefit of a Harvard education—was the development of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. As Nicholas Lemann points out in his history of the SAT, that test, now so often reviled as a barrier to students’ entry into elite universities, was, at its inception, regarded as an equalizer for ensuring that better-qualified students, whatever their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, could secure acceptance to the academic elite.¹⁸ (Certainly that was the view held by one Stanley Kaplan, who, unable to gain entry into medical school despite having graduated Phi Beta Kappa and second in his class, was working as a tutor preparing students for New York State Regents exams when one of them asked Kaplan to help prepare him for a new test that he was to take. Kaplan always regarded standardized tests as an instrument that would have enabled him, a talented but Jewish kid from a public college, to earn a seat in medical school. As it was, deprived of that opportunity, he became an entrepreneur and made millions.)¹⁹

The exam that was instituted with the intention to make applications more meritocratic, then, ended up favoring those students who had the wherewithal to pay for expensive test-prep courses. Students from well-funded schools also benefit from more opportunities to prove their academic rigor while in high school, more resources devoted to college guidance, more extracurriculars to burnish a resume. The end result, then, is a college application process that makes it much easier for a well-off student to present herself as a highly qualified candidate for admission. This does not negate the student’s hard work in her courses, in her extracurriculars, on her application. It does not change the fact that she is, indeed, a highly qualified candidate. But the environment in which she is functioning has done a lot to enable her success.

And that is even before we factor legacy admissions into the equation. Essentially a massive affirmative-action program for the well-to-do, legacy admissions refers to the boost awarded to students

of alumni in the admissions process at elite universities. And it is a substantial boost. This makes good strategic sense from the university's standpoint—it is hard to keep the donations flowing if you don't accept the children of your rich alumni—but it does mean that if someone benefited from cultural or social advantage a generation ago and got himself into an elite university, his children will continue to reap the rewards. Finally, there is the effect of the early-decision process, which significantly advantages those students who agree to apply early to a single university and, in most cases, commit to attending if they get in. Early-decision applicants are admitted to Columbia University at several times the rate of regular decision applicants. The tradeoff, however, is that by committing to one school, early applicants lose the chance to compare financial aid offers. So if maximizing financial aid is not a necessity, students can substantially increase their chances of getting into the schools of their choice.²⁰

All of these factors mean that the nation's elite universities, supposedly identifiers and cultivators of talent no matter its origin, are in fact perpetuators of an elite no less than when they were simply accepting wholesale the graduating classes of Groton and Philips Exeter, albeit a different elite. William Bowen, the former president of Princeton University and then of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, recently published a book examining the socioeconomic status of students in the elite universities.²¹ The numbers that his research turned up are striking. Only three percent of students in the universities he looked at—which included selective universities both private and public—were from the lowest quartile of the income distribution and without a parent who attended college. While students must doubtless be capable and academically strong to be admitted to the nation's top universities (setting aside for a moment the offspring of major donors and recruited athletes), the circumstances that enable some students to compile an application that will appeal to admissions officers go far beyond academic hard work, and far beyond what students can control. In any number of ways, being well-off improves your chances of getting into Harvard.

Why does this matter? Why do I care if my students recognize that they are where they are by the accident of a birth, good luck, and

a lot of advantages, and that but for the grace of God, they might have ended up in a very different place? That recognition is the necessary precondition for empathy. If you believe you have what you have because you earned it, then anyone who doesn't have it hasn't earned it, doesn't deserve it, and has no claim on your hard-earned dollars to get it. If you have benefited from accidents of history, geography, skin pigmentation, and sheer dumb luck in getting where you have gotten in life, you will be more grateful for what you understand to be your good fortune, and will view differently those who have not gotten where you have gotten. Instead of seeing them as held back by their own lack of ability or hard work, you will recognize that they have not had the advantages that you were able to capitalize on, a recognition that might impose some sense of obligation, but at the least would impose humility.

Is that—the sense of humility in the face of one's own good fortune, a sense that might engender empathy, and even a desire to help establish more conducive circumstances for the success of those less fortunate—a Jewish value? I could certainly make the case that it is, citing references to the Torah's exhortations to remember our sojourn in Egypt and be kind to the stranger—but I am mindful of something that Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the *New Republic*, has stated often, most recently in his *New York Times Book Review* evisceration of Norman Podhoretz's book, *Why Are Jews Liberals?*

Judaism is not liberal and it is not conservative; it is Jewish. But this is the beginning of the matter, not the end. For Judaism is immense and various: it holds within itself an oceanic plenitude of opinions and tendencies, developed over 2,000 years of philosophical and legal deliberation, and they do not all go together. To say that a view is Jewish is to claim a provenance more than an essence.

It is precisely a provenance that many American Jewish intellectuals seek. Deceived by the contemporary ideology of identity into the simplifying aspiration that all their parts may be unified into a seamless and shining whole, they rummage through the Jewish tradition to find

prooftexts for social and economic and political views that they have already established on other grounds. It is not enough that their views be true; they must also be authentic.²²

So I will not pretend that this position is the only authentic Jewish one, or a necessary outgrowth of halakhic and Torah values. But I do think that it is necessary. High school students feel keenly the need for justice and fairness in the world. In the view of many of them, the idea that the most worthy get the most and rise to the top seems eminently fair, which explains Ayn Rand's enduring popularity among that age group. If we can complicate their notions of worthiness, merit, and earning, we can have them think again about what those who succeed might owe the society that created the conditions for their success, and how they might view, and therefore what they might think it right to do for, those who have less than they.

How does one inculcate this sense of humility? If I had a conclusive answer to this question, I would be doing it more successfully than I am. But I do think that we can start by giving students some historical perspective on their extreme good fortune. At no other time in history of the Jewish Diaspora, and in no other place in the world, would they be as free to practice, to succeed, to achieve as Jews, as they have been and are in America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. And even as they work as hard as they can to achieve success on their own terms, their hard work is being boosted by a host of forces over which they have no control, but of which they need to be made aware. (Certainly, a yeshiva high school student should not be able to disparage affirmative action and its putative promoting of underqualified minorities without getting a stiff dose of American history in return. This is not to say that reasonable people cannot disagree strongly about the justice of affirmative action programs, the wisdom with which they have been implemented, and the ultimate outcomes they have achieved. But at the very least, those evaluations should be informed by a great deal of historical context.)

This belief in the power of teaching students about the past as a way to change how students see themselves in the world may seem

naive, to say nothing of wildly overestimating the value of a history education. But while we may be able to get our students to see and feel for those less well off than they by sending them to do *hesed* work among those populations—and while there is certainly value in that sort of consciousness-raising (besides, of course, the inherent value of the *hesed* being done)—the ultimate goal is something more: not merely that my students feel for those less fortunate than they, but that they come to recognize that they have arrived at where they are not solely by dint of their own hard work and smarts, but by the accretion of an unearned legacy of privilege that they have benefited from. Whether or not this recognition has any practical impact, it is a valuable corrective to their understanding of the world and their place in it.

NOTES

1. Like most of us, my students, in fact, encounter the working poor directly in the persons of their household help. But we think of them in the category of “nanny” or “housekeeper,” not “woman trying to support herself (and possibly a family) on a few hundred dollars a week.”
2. My co-panelist Dyonna Ginsburg, in her paper “Re-Anchoring Universalism to Particularism: The Potential Contribution of Orthodoxy to the Pursuit of *Tikkun Olam*,” introduces a very useful framework for thinking about these issues: the contrast between *hesed*, the individual acts of kindness that I engage in to help those less fortunate than myself, versus *zedek*, the collective political and social actions that we undertake to establish a more just society.
3. Throughout this paper, I will be using the terms “successful” and “success” to refer to financial success and the markers of educational and career advancement that are the stepping points thereto. This is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive use of the term; whether or not I would like the contemporary American Modern Orthodox community to define success in these terms, the reality is that much of it does so.
4. Norman Podhoretz, *Making It* (New York: Random House, 1967).
5. This is precisely what is meant by the term “white skin privilege,” a term that carries more than a whiff of the leftist academy but simply denotes the unearned benefits that accrue to a person by virtue of his being white.
6. Gifford Weary and Darcy A. Reich, “Attribution Theories,” in *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 320–325.

7. Melvin J. Lerner and Dale T. Miller, "Just World Research and the Attribution Process: Looking Back and Ahead." *Psychological Bulletin* 85 (1978): 1030–1051.
8. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008). Interestingly, this book received more mixed reviews than Gladwell's earlier work. It may be that the bloom is off of his particular brand of popularization of social science research. But I cannot help but wonder if the fact that he is questioning whether the cultural elites (a group that surely includes book reviewers for the major publications) have achieved their status solely by merit has anything to do with it.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–24.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–47, 50–55.
11. The process by which Jews came to be recognized as entirely white (rather than as members of a separate Semitic race) is part of the fascinating and complex history of the definition of race in America.
12. Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Norton, 2005).
13. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).
14. Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, p. 164.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
16. Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, chap. 4.
17. Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).
18. Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2000).
19. Karen Arenson, "Stanley Kaplan, Pioneer in Preparing Students for Exams, Dies at 90," *New York Times*, August 25, 2009, A14.
20. Recognizing these effects of their early-decision programs, Harvard and Princeton ended them in 2006, going to a single application deadline. Faced with the reality that other schools were not following their lead, however, and concerned that other schools would be "locking in" the strongest students before they got in the game, both universities reinstated early-admission programs five years later.
21. William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).
22. Leon Wieseltier, "Because They Believe," *New York Times*, August 13, 2009, BR1.