

Shanah Tovah everyone. Rosh Hashanah plays a game of hide and seek with us, bringing us into a dance of the hidden and revealed. It begins with the appearance of a new moon – a time when we know the moon only by its faint outlines and a sliver of light -- the rest to be revealed to us as the New Year unfolds.

This hide and seek game is also at play in our spiritual lives. As Rosh Hashanah carries us into the ten days of repentance leading to Yom Kippur, we seek to know ourselves: the thoughts, feelings and deeds we may not have held ourselves accountable for in the year gone by. We may even uncover parts of ourselves that have been hidden from our own daily awareness.

It is no wonder that the spiritual preparations for the New Year are named as *cheshbon hanefesh* -- literally, an accounting of our souls. Like a good forensic accountant, we scrutinize the books. We are challenged to find everything, every account -- even the aspects of ourselves hidden away in some remote tax shelter of the soul where the rules about such things seem more flexible. This honest accounting becomes the basis for repairing our relationships with others and with God.

This is a daunting task, and not one we necessarily look forward to each year; but we have a good model in our humblest of teachers -- Moses. There is a moment in Torah where the priest Korach and his supporters rise up to challenge Moshe. “Who are you to place yourselves

above everyone else? Didn't God say we are all holy?" Now, those are fighting words. But Moses's response is instructive. He doesn't shout back. He doesn't yet call down the wrath of God. Instead, Moses falls on his face. Literally, down on the ground. The Rabbis write that Moses casts himself down not to buy time or plead for help, but to examine....to seek to know and understand himself. Was there truth in Korach's accusation? Was Moshe guilty of arrogance or lust for power? Even Moses needed to ask the hard questions, to scrutinize himself and be sure of his motives before he could respond.

Beliefs and attitudes that we're unaware of can affect us and our relationships with others in unexpected ways. For example: Two years ago I attended a family Bat Mitzvah out of state. As we entered the sanctuary, there was a podium on each side of the towering bima. At the right podium stood a petite woman with a tallit and kippah; at the left, a tall man, also in tallit and kippah. "Ah," I said to myself, "Do I know this rabbi? Is he also a graduate of my seminary? And I hope the cantor will help my relative with the chanting." Once everyone was settled into their seats, the woman welcomed us and began the service. And I was confused: Why was the cantor giving the introduction? Well, because she was the *rabbi* -- and *he* was the cantorial soloist. Somewhere, hidden from my awareness, was the assumption that the man was the rabbi, and the woman was the cantor. Even me.

Rosh Hashanah is a time when we explore the hidden and the revealed. My unconscious association between men and rabbinic leadership has a name: Implicit bias. Implicit biases are outside of our awareness. They are not the same as thoughts and feelings we know we have, but wish to hide because they are not socially acceptable. Implicit biases may even contradict values and beliefs that we hold strongly.

Over the past year the media has brought us disturbing and gut-wrenching reports and images of racial prejudice and violent racial hatred in our country. California, Missouri, Baltimore, Texas, New York, Florida.... In July we made a family visit to Charleston, South Carolina. We'd planned it back in January, a trip to visit an old friend and see the city. As I drove downtown, I did not know our route of slowly crawling traffic would take us past Mother Emanuel Church. We fell into silence as the front of the church, with its makeshift memorials for the nine people murdered during Bible study, came into view. And then another sight, this one in my rear view mirror. Directly behind us was a white pick-up truck with two men in it. Their truck bed held only one thing -- a large flagpole with a huge Confederate flag streaming out the back, as they, too, drove past the church.

I felt grief, and disbelief, and then visceral fear and anger. And in that moment, I thought, "The problem with racism in this country is clear – it's THEM." But as I reflect on that experience in Charleston, and on how racism is alive and well in this country with continuing,

devastating consequences, I realize: the men in the pickup may be the most obvious, outward, explicit manifestation of the problem, but the complete equation is not so simple. And my thoughts turn to the revealed and the hidden, to Korach's challenge to Moshe and the task of *cheshbon hanefesh*.

In this season of *teshuvah*, my most pressing questions go beyond how to define and condemn the racism that I see so clearly outside of me, and toward searching out what I may be hiding even from myself: Even as I, as all of us here, insist that racism in thought, word and deed is immoral, unacceptable, is it possible that we might hold biases of which we are not even aware? Do I, do we harbor seeds of prejudice that contradict our deeply held values, that rest beyond conscious awareness but that can influence our thinking, attitudes, judgments, and even actions?

Let me step aside for a moment to say that race and racism is hard and often painful to talk about, with special challenges, complexities and sensitivities when approaching it in a Jewish context, within the American Jewish community.

We have been and sometimes still are the targets of prejudice ourselves. We have been and often still can feel like outsiders. Our tradition insists that we identify with the stranger and the oppressed because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. We teach our

children that, in the history of the struggle for civil rights, Jews helped to found the NAACP and stood among the leadership of the Conference for Civil Rights; we remember that during the Freedom Summer of 1964, 50% of the white organizers in Mississippi were Jewish; and we call to mind images of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel walking beside Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. during the march on Selma.

Our community, specifically and explicitly identifies itself as one that stands for justice and compassion, that embraces diversity and inclusion – not only of race but of gender identification, family structures, and sexual orientation. All the more painful, then, for us to consider ways that we might fall short of our highest aspirations (*when what we'd like to say is, "You know: We're Jews! How can we be guilty of prejudice?"*).

So, on one hand, it was easy for me to sign up and join together with other faith leaders earlier this month in Raleigh as part of the NAACP's march from Selma to Washington to demand uncorrupted and unfettered access to the ballot box, a fair criminal justice system, sustainable jobs with a living wage, and equitable public education.

On the other hand, signing up to test myself on a website dedicated to the study of implicit bias was much harder. I'd gotten there by asking a member our own community, a researcher in the psychology of morality, about the topic; she pointed me to Project Implicit – a non-

profit organization and international collaborative network of researchers anchored at Harvard University. Their goal has been to research and produce new ways of understanding attitudes, stereotypes and other hidden biases that influence perception, judgment, and action.

The website has tests to see if you have any implicit biases or preferences around such issues as the young vs. the elderly, gender and career roles, religion, disability, weight, and a wide range of other issues. The racial bias test measures within a millisecond how long it takes you to associate African-American faces or other images with positive and negative words in relationship to the amount of time it takes you to pair European-American faces with positive and negative words.

I warmed up by taking the test on my attitude toward feminism (in case you are wondering, only a slight bias in favor of feminists). But this did not prepare me for the results for my test on racial bias -- which I took twice. According to the website, I have a “moderate automatic preference for European American compared to African American.” I certainly had hoped that I would have no implicit preference, that my results would be consistent with *b'tzelem Elohim*, the Jewish understanding of the intrinsic sanctity, worth and equality of every person.

Soberingly, my results should not have come as a surprise. A significant majority, 75% of white respondents, show automatic white preference. And while we might want to explain this away by saying it is

simply a preference for one's own, more familiar, racial group, this cannot explain that 75% of Asian Americans also show a preference for whites over blacks -- as do 50% of Black Americans. Researchers conclude that our implicit attitudes are influenced not solely by identification with our own "in-group" but by what we learn is regarded as "good" in the broader culture.

Some might ask: Does implicit bias matter? After all, if I am marching with the NAACP, if we are working hard to live our explicitly held values, why does an unconscious preference even make a difference? And I would say: That's a question that privilege allows us. What so many of us are only becoming aware of now – courtesy of body cameras, citizen videos, social media, (and maybe social satirists Key and Peele) – are the myriad ways that assumptions about race and social status, assumptions often held by good, well-intentioned people, play out in our lives with very real consequences. It's not only extreme, fatal examples, but daily interactions: when, for instance, we jump to a conclusion about the education, occupation or social status of the person in front of us because of their skin color, it makes a difference. And institutional injustices can be fed and maintained by well-meaning majorities who are not aware of their own biases.

But what can we do about prejudices we aren't even aware of? It would be easy to feel defeated, or helplessly guilty – but both of these lead to inaction. And as I've said many times from this bimah – despair

is not a Jewish value. On a personal level, the first step in addressing implicit biases is self-education. Once we become aware of the ways in which our automatic preferences might be influencing our actions and judgment in ways we don't approve of, we can begin consciously to make choices that counter those preferences. Moreover, with time, effort and new experiences, automatic preferences prove to be malleable. Our tradition of *teshuvah* and the scientific research both tell us that change is possible, even at our deepest levels.

The ten day period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur calls us to examine our souls, to know ourselves more fully. This year, I invite us to raise our awareness of the biases and preferences that each of us might carry. You could start by visiting the Project Implicit website to take the test on racial bias for yourself. I'll be sending out a link via e-mail and Facebook after Rosh Hashanah.

Another step could be to acknowledge that the history of American Jews and the civil rights struggle is more complex than the exclusively positive version we often tell ourselves. From the beginning of our country, there were Jewish abolitionists, but also Jewish slaveholders. The design of the Confederate battle flag, subject of so much recent controversy, was redesigned from its original cross shape after a Jewish friend of the designer asked that the symbol of a particular religion not be made the symbol of the Confederacy.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as we integrated ourselves more fully into American society, some Jews actively distanced themselves from blacks who fought for equality: In his book “The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity,” the historian Eric Goldstein talks about Booker T. Washington’s public suggestion of an affinity between black and Jewish histories of oppression. In response, The Jewish Ledger of New Orleans derided African Americans in frankly racist terms, insisting on the intellectual superiority of Jews.

During the struggles of the ‘50s and ‘60s, many Jews did fight for civil rights for all; but many among our people did not. Some remained silent, hoping to protect our then-tenuous status as “honorary whites.”

It’s painful, even sickening, to speak these words; but we have participated in the fullness of American history, not only the “good parts” – and it is essential that we acknowledge and own the fullness of our story if we are to understand ourselves and learn to do differently.

Self-examination, and acknowledging more of our own communal history is a start; we must follow with action. So what steps can we take, both as individuals and as a Kehillah, a sacred community?

I don’t have all the answers, but I propose that we grapple with the question together in the coming year. In November, I’ll be attending a “Dismantling Racism” training sponsored by the non-profit Organizing Against Racism – North Carolina. This organization encourages religious communities to commit to a conscious program of working

against racism. We don't know yet if their specific model is right for us, but we can learn more, and our congregation can think together about what it might mean in terms of internal policies and programs -- and also the justice work we do in our broader community. An active stance in combatting racism might inform our work on national and local issues including those of affordable housing, anti-bias policing, fairness in access to quality education, voting rights and healthcare, to name just a few.

This is a humbling time of year. Through *cheshbon hanefesh* we confront the fullness of who we are. We uncover the ways we have fallen short, and ways we may have participated in a society which falls short of our highest ideals. But humility leads the way to hope, because we know the power and potential of teshuvah: we can change, we can return and strengthen our essential goodness, we can come closer to living lives and building communities that reflect our values and aspirations. When we repair our relationship to ourselves and to others, we honor and repair our connection to God.

May we enter this New Year, then, with a balance of humility and hope. May it be a year that brings blessing and goodness, understanding and justice to us and to our world. L'shanah tovah.