

WHAT ADVANTAGES DO YOU HAVE?

A GUIDED CONVERSATION



WELCOME

Before we begin, let's review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

1. **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed-upon meetings. I'll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
2. **Presence:** When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
3. **Double Confidentiality:** What I hear and say stays here. If I see another group member in a different context, I will not bring up anything they said here unless they do first.
4. **Vulnerability:** I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as possible with my perspectives and experiences in order to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks as well.
5. **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
6. **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.
7. **Stepping Up & Stepping Back:** I understand that some of us are natural talkers while others are quieter. I'll pay attention to how much I am contributing, and will seek to balance how much I am talking with how much I'm listening.
8. **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of big questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
9. **Ownership:** This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

ASK & SHARE

Take a moment to consider ways in which you consider yourself fortunate. When everyone is ready, you will be invited (but not required) to briefly share your thoughts with the group.

You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

LEARN

Tal Fortgang, a student at Princeton University, wrote a controversial article about privilege for a campus paper; it went viral when it was republished by Time magazine. In it, he describes the ways in which his grandparents were persecuted during the Holocaust, and their hard work, upon getting to the United States with no money and no English, to start a new life. He suggests that those who tell him to “check his privilege” think that he “ought to feel personally apologetic because white males seem to pull most of the strings in the world.” This, he argues, diminishes his personal accomplishments and overlooks the ways in which members of his own family suffered to provide him with a better life. Responses to his thesis appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, Salon, Newsweek, Vice, The Guardian, BBC News, Ebony, and many other publications.

Daniel Gastfriend, a recent Princeton graduate, responded to Fortgang in The Huffington Post. Please read this excerpt from his article, “Reflections on Privilege: An Open Letter to Tal Fortgang,” together as a group. You can find the whole piece online here: <http://huff.to/1jaNF7R>

Dear Tal,

Like many others, I read your piece, “Checking My Privilege: Character as the Basis of Privilege” -- a retort to the motto “check your privilege” which, you argue, aims to devalue your opinion as a white male and make you feel guilty for your privilege. Although we do not know each other, we both come from families of Holocaust survivors, grew up in Jewish-American homes, and studied at Princeton. And I agree -- we do not need to apologize for our origins. Nothing about this notion, however, justifies blindness to inequality.

My maternal grandfather grew up in Nuremberg, Germany. After barely escaping a Hitler Youth attempt to drive a nail through his head, he fled with his family in 1938 for the United States. My paternal grandfather was not so lucky. Born to an Orthodox Jewish family in Sosnowiec, Poland, he witnessed at age 13 the annihilation of everything and everyone he held dear under Nazi rule. He [faced] brutality...over three years in the concentration camps, the horrors of the death march, the grief of witnessing his dying cousin tossed alive into a mass grave. Through incredible fortitude and luck, he managed to survive. And although the nightmares plague him to this day, he eventually became a successful businessman in the United States, providing a young family with a better life.

Two generations later, I am free from the violence that tormented my grandfathers and have so far enjoyed a life of remarkable opportunity. Like you, I am fiercely proud of how my family came to be where we are today.

One could take a number of different perspectives on how our family histories relate to the notion of privilege. Yours is understandable: Your ancestors fought relentlessly, and against all odds, to build a new life for your family. This is a legacy to be celebrated, and you should not feel guilty for their resilience or success.

But I find another angle more compelling. I grew up with a set of privileges of which my grandfather could only have dreamed. The injustices he faced -- and the senseless lottery of birth that condemned him to such suffering -- make me inclined to seek out inequality and injustice in whatever forms they take. Included among these are many of the structures that the phrase “check your privilege” means to challenge. While I agree this expression should not be used to silence anyone’s opinion, I believe it can make us more cognizant of the privilege that comes with our social position, how that privilege shapes our perspective, and the manifold obstacles that burden so many others... Yes, it is possible to achieve prosperity in the face of such inequalities and worse, as our grandparents so remarkably did. This does not mean

we should tolerate them.

You vehemently defend the American meritocracy. Indeed, there is something marvelous about a country in which immigrants as extraordinarily disadvantaged as our grandparents could build a new life for themselves and their children. You also write, “It’s not a matter of white or black, male or female or any other division which we seek, but a matter of the values we pass along, the legacy we leave, that perpetuates ‘privilege.’” I wish this were the entire story.

What your piece misses is a recognition that, despite the successes of families like our own, harmful structural inequalities persist on the basis of class, race, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in the U.S. Children growing up in poor areas often attend public schools with significantly less funding than those born in affluent areas (a disparity that does not exist in most developed countries); almost one in five American women are survivors of completed or attempted rape; individuals with non-conforming sexual and gender identities face high rates of workplace discrimination and violent crime; blacks are given harsher prison sentences for the same offenses than whites; resumes with black-sounding names are 50 percent less likely to get called back than equivalent ones with white-sounding names, and emails to University professors with minority or female names are 25 percent less likely to get responses than those with white male names; the list goes on.

Being aware of these issues -- and of the fact that we, by nature of our race and gender, are shielded from many of them -- is the first step towards rectifying them. And while I share your enthusiasm for the meritocratic elements of American society that allowed our families to flourish, I find deeply troubling the fact that income mobility is lower in the U.S. than in the vast majority of developed countries; 70 percent of people born into the bottom quintile of the income distribution in America never reach the middle.

Like you, I strive to carry on the spirit of my grandparents’ hard work. But I also know I have unfairly benefited from a society that favors affluent, white, heterosexual men. While this privilege is not the entire story of why I am where I am today, it does exist, as do the damaging inequalities that continue to fuel it. My family’s painful history does not nullify these injustices; on the contrary, it highlights the imperative to expose and erase them.

Several years ago, my paternal grandfather brought our extended family on a trip to Poland. He took us to the village where he grew up, the ghetto his family was forced into, and finally, to Auschwitz. Shaking with tears, he implored us: “Whenever you see evil in the world, you must cry out, you must act! Never be silent in the face of injustice.”

The first step to address injustice is to acknowledge the way it manifests in the world. I am privileged -- in part due to the opportunities my grandparents provided me, but also in part due to my social position in American society. And in honor of my grandparents' legacy, I refuse to be content with a society where equality of opportunity is still not extended to all, and where racism, sexism, and prejudice continue to exist -- in any form.

Sincerely,
Daniel Gastfriend

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What conclusions does Gastfriend draw from his family's history?
- Gastfriend writes that he has "unfairly benefited from a society that favors affluent, white, heterosexual men." In what ways does he mean that he has benefitted unfairly?
- What does Gastfriend understand the phrase "check your privilege," to mean?

Reflective Questions

- In what ways have you benefitted from the way that society is organized?
- Do you think that those benefits are fair, or unfair?
- Think back to what you said you felt fortunate to have in your life. How would your life be different if you didn't have that thing in your life?
- How would your life be different if you weren't privileged in other ways that you are? Or had privileges you currently don't?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Consider the following text, from the Book of Deuteronomy:

Take care lest you forget Adonai your God and fail to keep God's commandments, God's rules, and God's laws, which I enjoin upon you today. When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget Adonai your God, who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its seraph serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your ancestors had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." Remember that it is Adonai your God who gives you the power to get wealth, in fulfillment of the covenant that God made on oath with your ancestors, as is still the case.

--Deuteronomy 8:11-19

Discussion Questions:

- What concern does this text express about the potential effects of wealth and wellbeing on the Israelites?
- Does the fact that the Israelites were oppressed before they arrived in the promised land affect their entitlement to the bounty they will find there?
- In what ways do people today erroneously believe that they prosper because of their own “power and might,” when they instead owe their success to other factors?
- To what extent do you attribute the advantages you enjoy to your own efforts? Are there factors other than those efforts that have contributed to these advantages?
- How does remembering history impact our understanding of social privileges today? Do you think a history of oppression alters how we should think about issues of social privilege?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

DO

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you're taking from this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.



The Union for Reform Judaism leads the largest and most diverse Jewish movement in North America. We strengthen communities that connect people to Jewish life. Visit <https://urj.org/> for more information.



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