

A Community of 'Others': Jews, Peoplehood and Justice

Keynote Address

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Good evening. *Chag Sukkot*. Thank you for this beautiful invitation, and for being here. It's a lovely thing, this invitation to explore with you themes of Jewish identity, community and engaging in Justice. We have come from a compelling history, our people. We have worked hard. We have enjoyed tremendous success. And we see ourselves as a people of justice. But still. While there has been a history of partnership, right now we are not in strong relationship with communities of color (both inside and outside of the Jewish community), many US Jews are broken by what's happening in Israel and Palestine, and despite our accomplishments Jews are targeted—there are people in this nation who want to ensure that they will not be replaced by you.

This is a complex? confusing? curious? compelling? time to be Jewish in the United States. And to see our next generation through, I'd suggest we need to be better grounded in who we are, we need to understand ourselves as part of a diverse US citizenry, informed by our propensity to mobilize, engage and act. And it's not just a thriving Jewish community that's at stake. I think it's fair to say that if we look through the lenses of systematic injustice, statistics tell us some of our lives are at stake. That we don't matter. We can do something about this.

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As United States Jews we have a historical narrative that threads our story through Columbus "discovering" the Americas. The first documented case of a Jew to reach the shores of America is a fellow named Joachim (Chaim) Gams, part of Sir Walter Raleigh's expedition, arrived on Roanoke Island, North Carolina in 1585.

Next came the settling of German Jews who left Germany because of persecution, restrictive laws, economic hardship. They began arriving to the United States in the 1840s.

Then came Eastern European Jews who were forced out of Europe by overpopulation, legislation designed to oppress, and poverty. Coming to the United States seemed enticing given the prospect of financial and social advancement. Eastern European Jews, including my grandmother Dora, and my Grandfather Isadore after whom I am named, began to immigrate to the United States in large numbers after 1880.

And we love this part of the story. The part that tells us that we are like other marginalized people in the United States. We have been pushed out, we have been poor, restricted from employment and housing

opportunities, our access to upward mobility has been limited. And this part of our story, or narrative is not untrue.

And we love the container in which this narrative exists. The book jacket, if you will, covered with sepia tone pictures of a German man in a fine suit and hat next to his wife in a high-collar dress, the black and white photo of a girl maybe 11 working in a garment factory adjacent to a picture of a bearded black clad pushcart operator making his way down Orchard street, there's a picture of a beautiful, towering late 1800's synagogue that looks more like an Episcopal Church than a Shtetel Shul. There is a picture of two young, brave IDF soldiers, neither is older than 21 and one is a woman. And then there might be a picture of a Rabbi in front of a congregation. This photo is likely in color. He might be in a billowy robe. And in his congregation all Shul goes are white.

But that is not the whole story. 20% of Jews in the United States are racially and ethnically diverse. Most non-orthodox Jews marry folks who aren't Jewish, and because we have the privilege of living in the United States, the community of folks from whom we pick our partners and spouses is and will be increasingly people of color.

So what does it mean as a community that we perpetuate an inauthentic narrative about who we are and who we will be? What does it mean that we have a big, diverse, Jewish community out there--right out here, folks who for whatever reason don't daven between four walls or donate to communal organizations or who are queer or differently abled or who are torn in their souls about Israel, or who are Black, like me—people who challenge the narrative, and with whom we are struggling to open our hearts, bring home and make feel welcome. And what do our struggles with racism and inclusion coupled with the fact that we are also an engaged, committed, outraged, sometimes scared, courageous community—and what does it mean we need to learn *about and know* to be our best, most expansive, most inclusive selves? How do we navigate as we try to authentically and purposefully engage in Justice? And why does it matter?

It matters because this is about people. About us. And really—our most basic needs.

1. We want and need to feel seen and known. To have a strong, integrated, and nuanced sense of our identity.
2. We want and need feel connected to and part of something bigger. Like we matter to someone and something. That we belong to somebody. That we are part of a Community.
3. And while right now feeling successful as a person of purpose can be a challenge, we need and want to feel like we can make a difference. Like we can make a positive contribution. Like we can contribute to making things better than they are. Like we are firmly situated and pointed in the right direction on the arc that bends toward Justice.

While I grew up just down the street in the Western Addition (before white people save for radical, communist Jews lived here) and was Bat Mitzvah at one of San Francisco's oldest synagogues, went to Israel with NFTY, and find myself in this amazing role working deep inside the organized Jewish community, it's taken me some time to feel part of the mainstream organized Jewish world. My story isn't really reflected in our community narrative, and there's always something that reminds me that no matter how good I look on paper—how strong my Jewish bona fides are, darn it if confusion about who we are as a community, our racism, and our struggle with really engaging in Justice doesn't get in the way.

A couple of years ago I started to feel more confident as a communal Jew, and started to dip my toe into engagement. An email came across my desk asking for folks to deliver *Rosh Hashana* grocery bags to those homebound. I loved the idea. There was something practical, and essential for me to do. Last year I took with me my daughter who was almost 11 at the time. I anticipated it might be confusing for the folks on the other side of each grocery bag to have two black people standing in front of them wishing a *Shana Tova*. But to be totally honest I also figured us being black would play into their assumptions about well-trained labor and who delivers food, so maybe it wouldn't be that weird—especially if it never occurred to them that we *were* Jewish.

So this year I was excited to again sign up for my *Rosh Hashana* grocery bag delivery run, and this time reached out to a white Jewish friend to join me. Before hitting my route, which reminded me of delivering papers when I was 8 years old, I ran home to tidy up—mostly to put on a proper shirt to hide my tattoos. While I've grown comfortable wearing them out at work, I've made it a personal policy to keep my tattoos hidden from Jewish elders—worried I might offend or trigger Holocaust memories.

All cleaned up and outside a huge Berkeley apartment complex, I rang the doorbell. Next, I introduced myself saying I am Ilana Kaufman, here on behalf of Jewish Family Community Services delivering groceries. I was quickly invited into each building, and given directions to each door. But when my friend and I arrived to each apartment, and a face from inside emerged to greet me, I was suddenly invisible. All attention was directed to my white friend. I immediately was not Ilana Kaufman, she was.

On my delivery route was a man whose name I did not immediately recognize, and whom I'd never met in person. When we went to deliver his groceries, power wheelchair bound he asked us to come in and put things away. Put the perishables in the fridge. I happily complied. Put the candles on the upper shelf of the cabinet. No problem. But then he conversed only with my friend. Asking her name—even for the spelling of her last name. About her work. But there I was. The initiator of this activity. The one who made the plans, changed her shirt, and rang the bell. And he simply ignored me.

This happened over and over again that day. And I'll be honest. After it was all over and I dropped my friend to her car, I drove away and felt stupid. Like an idiot that I didn't anticipate what would happen when I brought a white person with me. And I felt sad. And hurt. That I was invisible. He absolutely could not see me. There was nothing in how he saw the world, specifically the Jewish world that suggested Ilana Kaufman could be me.

Even though I was standing right in front of him, in the mind's eye, the *eyen tachat eyen* of the man in the motorized chair, he could not see me.

The story of our lives as Jews is bound in the book cover depicting German Jews and factory workers and pushcarts and Shul's that look like churches. In motorized-chair-man's version of our *Sefer Chaim*, our Book of Life, there are no pages with people who look like me. Stories like this illustrate how confusing and counterproductive it is for us in the organized Jewish world to be educated about our history when it obfuscates from or makes opaque our truth about who we are, who is part of our Tribe. This not-the-whole-story, this half-truthing, this—what's the delicate way for me to say that when we don't tell the whole truth it makes it difficult if not impossible 1) to see people for who we really are, 2) to be meaningfully part of and build diverse communities, and 3) authentically act from a place of and advancing real justice.

WE MUST SEE PEOPLE FOR WHO THEY ARE:

And to see one as they see themselves means we need 1) the ability to reflexively consider *Da Lifnei Mi Attah Omed*, "Know before Whom You Stand"? And while sure, we most often see this phrase in Synagogues above the Ark as a gentle admonition to enter Synagogue prayer in a way that reminds you to be respectful before God, I would suggest that since there is no evidence in Jewish text that we have any idea what God looks like, and we carry a core belief that *בְּצֵלֶם אֱלֹהִים*, *B'tzelem Elohim* (All People are Made in the Divine Image), I would suggest *Da Lifnei Mi Attah Omed*, "Know Before Whom You Stand," is really a reminder that anyone of us, in our form that may be unfamiliar or unknown to you, is Divine and could be God. People are precious, and we don't know their stories. We don't know who they really are. Thus we must treat each individual as it could be God herself—with care, thoughtfulness, mindfulness and love.

And this is especially important for us as US Jews, as we have 1) a racially and ethnically diverse population who is only becoming more hued, and 2) we are part of a US citizenry who has a single charge which is to be civically informed/connected/engaged. That means we are responsible for all of our neighbors, our classmates and our friends. We don't know their experiences, nor their burdens, but we do know the darker their skin in this country, the less they will be seen in the organized Jewish world, and the more they will be seen in the dangerous secular world.

Our charge as US Jews is steeped in our own history and experiences. We arrived to this country pushed and pulled and sometimes hunted. While European in background, we felt different from those other kind of white people. We knew ourselves to be hard working. Smart. Resilient. We understood ourselves as values driven engagers who recognize injustice. We saw ourselves as more like those being marginalized than the marginalizers. We felt internal motivation, a spiritual propulsion to march for Civil Rights.

But something happened along the way from the 1940's, 50's, 1960's to 2000's. The United States codified into its systems of housing and economic advancement Jews from Europe, shattering the,

“...myth that Jews pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps...Jews’ and other white ethnics’ upward mobility was the result of programs that allowed Jews (us) to float on a rising economic tide,” with ripples slowly moving Jews toward whiteness.

And here we are in 2017, in a nation so broken by racism that we are engaged in some sort of Cold Civil War, a nation where 20% of my Jewish community wakes up every day first wondering if our Black and Brown children will be okay today, then wondering if we will make it emotionally if not physically alive to work today.

We have no idea before whom we stand.

THEREFORE WE AS US JEWS MUST LOOK BEYOND AND COMMIT OURSELVES TO A BROADER CONCEPTION OF COMMUNITY, INCLUDING JEWISH COMMUNITY. WE NEED TO BROADEN WHAT’S IN OUR MINDS EYE.

We are a people of diaspora, motion and movement. We are a people who know how to stand on the edge to see things from different vantage points—to take in and consider another’s perspective and experience. We are especially capable of this ability to see beyond ourselves because as we move from location to location, we are designed to shift shape, adapt and become a new—even sometimes to the point where we are not able to immediately recognize ourselves. To ensure we never loose connection, we have been given the capacity for Moral Imagination, Edmund Burke’s notion that our ethics should transcend our own personal experience and embrace the dignity of the human race. As Jews and the United States become more racially diverse Moral Imagination is one tool to ensure we can stand in others shoes so that WE create space for the possibility that we are, in fact, in many ways the same.

And as US Jews, just 2.2% of the US population we must focus on bringing in, embracing, building and perpetuating our communities. And for us as Jews, we seem fixated on this idea of centralizing a particular Jewish identity (which often excludes most forms of diversity) in the name of perpetuating Jewish community. But what if we shifted the physics, and centralized Jewish community (and all of our diversity) in the name of perpetuating Jewish identity? It would drive us out of our buildings in to the spaces where communities of color, undocumented immigrants, and Queers—many of whom are Jews, gather. And they gather in communities actively focused on Justice as they have lives that to those in power don’t matter. We have to equitably care for our fellow citizens, neighbors and our friends. Even and especially when that’s hard for us to do.

As Jews we see ourselves essential to and an integral part of what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called a Beloved Community, Dr. King’s global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. But let me say this, Dr. King understood that to live in a Beloved Community—a community of care for and with one another, that takes a personal, not passive commitment. An actual decision. A sense of internal unrest that we each have something critical and essential at stake, and that those with power must redistribute the power to literally balance the scales of Justice. Dr. King said:

“Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.”

We must act. We must engage. And for those of us with unearned power and privilege, we must use it for good, and redistribute the abundance so that as a minimum standard each one of us, our neighbors can live in dignity. We must embody the core Jewish and universal value of Justice.

Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof

JUSTICE JUSTICE YOU SHALL PURSUE. But how do we get there? What are our Strategies and Approaches?

We must be learned in Diversity, Inclusion and Equity studies. Become culturally competent. And unfortunately this likely won't happen in a Jewish context. But please—go learn about the actual frameworks, ideas and concepts that we need to be able to meaningfully and purposefully engage with people different than us.

Embrace Intersectionality—the idea that our experiences and realities as multidimensionally diverse people matter. We get to be whole, integrated, diverse individuals. Do not make Jews choose which identity is more important. Those of us of multiple backgrounds don't rank our identities. We just exist as whole people. Don't take that from us. From me. That's a fool's errand, and more importantly, Jews of multiple identities—we are the present and most definitely the future. Intersectionality is one of the frameworks needed to bring diverse communities together.

And a note on intersectionality. Try to set aside your fear that somehow this will make us less Jewish. Trust that we have the capacity manage ourselves, and don't get in the way of us being whole and who God made us to be.

Know United States History and Social Science (colonialism , slavery, immigration including Jews, civil rights, Jewish assimilation, whiteness, white supremacy, Black History 1965-present, modern US Jewish History (the revisionist version—the one that actually INCLUDES Jews of Color.)...

...and how ideas and realities of whiteness fit into that history. We must simultaneously hold that while some white Jews don't see themselves as white, we choose to live in a context that has assigned to Jews of European backgrounds whiteness, with all of its power, privileges and responsibilities.

With the real diversity of the Jewish community in your mind's eye, scan everywhere you go in the Jewish world, notice who's missing, and commit to finding a way to bring them in.

Take risks, model leadership, share your work, fail forward. Be rigorous in your approach.

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So like I mentioned when we first began this conversation, I went to deliver *Rosh Hashana* bags. Got all cleaned up. Rang each door bell. Introduced myself saying I am Ilana Kaufman, here on behalf of Jewish Family Community Services delivering groceries.

And like I mentioned--on my delivery route was a man whose name I did not immediately recognize, and whom I'd never met in person. The bag said Markowitz on it. Mr. Markowitz asked that the perishables in the fridge. That the candles be placed on the upper shelf of the cabinet. Mute, I worked while Mr. Markowitz spoke only to my friend. I was the initiator of the activity. The one made the plans, changed her shirt, and rang the bell. And he simply ignored me...until...

Until my friend says, and this is Ilana. Mr. Markowitz spun around his wheelchair and motored over in my direction. He rolled right up to me and said, I know an Ilana. Mr. Markowitz tone became soft. Mr. Markowitz went on. He said, the Ilana I know works for a Jewish organization. I softly asked, the JCRC? Mr. Markowitz said yes. And my friend then says, this is Ilana Kaufman.

Mr. Markowitz slowly rolled closer to me, and then stared over thick glasses. He looked right at me--sincerely apologetic, and then reached out his hand to take mine. He held my hand, and told me all the ways he valued the half-year I spent on his behalf making calls and writing emails to help him successfully navigate anti-Semitism. Mr. Markowitz went on to say that his life is not like the lives of other people, because of his disabilities—and that what I did for him really mattered--to his quality of life as a disabled person and as an Observant Jew.

Next to a white person Mr. Markowitz could not see me. He could not recognize me as part of his Jewish community. Seems he couldn't fathom the form in which I arrived. And once he was invited to engage is Moral Imagination he knew not only who I was, and what I had done for him, but he knew he had hurt me.

Mr. Markowitz was still holding onto my hand—squeezing a little longer and tighter to make sure I knew he saw me. I know he did. And now HE knows who to imagine on the other side of the phone when he calls the Jewish Community. And now he also knows who is missing from our Book of Life. Perhaps he'll add some new pages.

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Let me conclude with this. Over the summer my daughter Ari attended Jewish summer day camp. One day I went to pick her up, and there was my beautiful brown ponytailed girl talking to a tiny, little lovely brown girl also with a ponytail. I thought it was sweet, I thought it was cute, and I was excited that my 'tween could be a mirror for a younger brown Jewish girl.

As my daughter and I walked to our car I heard my daughter say, "bye-bye, Ari". From my vantage point the only person I could see was a grown African-American man. So I figured he was somebody's parent

named Ari. And then from behind a car emerged that tiny ponytailed brown girl. And my daughter says to me that's Ari. And all I could do was smile. My heart burst a little.

Inside the Jewish community I've spent my entire life looking for a reflection of myself, and there are none. And while I'm fairly certain the Jewish communities that I serve and the Jewish communities in which I exist will never reflect the Jewish community that actually exists, we—right here in this Sukkah are the ones responsible for making all the right changes so that each next generation never questions if they are in our Book of Life.

We have to print the next revision so that our community here right now, and all to come always they see themselves within, and know they are included—that they matter to their community.

I am of the bridge generation. I am of the Mulatto Millenium, I am one what author Danzy Senna calls, New People. I know I am a bridge charged to hold space across our divides.

Our Jewish community story isn't one of you or me or them, but a story of us.

And I need you. We need you. You need you---to make that intentional, specific, action oriented change Dr. King is talking about when talking about creating a beloved community. Because this is about all of us. And it is up to us to fight for justice inside and outside the Jewish community--for all of our communities, as they are overlapping and often the same.

Seeing people for who they are and how they want to be seen, honoring that we are precious and possibly divine, and committing in an intentional and action oriented way to engage in and activate change are the tools that not only make our community more inclusive, expansive, and welcoming, these tools are what build and fortify this pathway forward, and ensure that we, together and walking forward, are focused and pointed in the right direction on the arc that bends toward Justice.
