

Internalized Oppression

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In the opening passages of *Out of Egypt*, a memoir by Andre Aciman, we meet the narrator's great uncle Vili. Vili wishes to see himself, and to be seen, as anything but what he is: a Turkish-born Jew living in Egypt. Almost groundlessly, Vili identifies as Italian, enthusiastically supporting Mussolini. Aciman writes, "When told the Italian army had never been valiant, Uncle Vili had immediately challenged an Alexandrian Greek to a duel, especially after the latter had reminded him that all those Italian medals and trinkets hardly altered the fact that Vili was still a Turkish rascal, and a Jewish one to boot. This infuriated Uncle Vili, not because someone had impugned his Jewishness—he would have been the first to do so—but because he hated to be reminded that many Jews had become Italian through shady means."

Later, with fascist armies bearing down on North Africa, even as German and Eastern European Jews seek refuge from the Nazis there, the family is understandably terrified. Their anger, though, is often misdirected. Vili's sister Clara exclaims, "The ways some Jews behave, ... I'd run them out of this world into the next. It's because of Jews like them that they hate Jews like us."ⁱ

Some may be tempted to deride Vili and Clara as "self-hating Jews." That epithet, though, blames victims of antisemitism by ignoring or downplaying the centuries of persecution and negative stereotyping heaped upon them and their ancestors. When people are told, over the course of a lifetime and more, that they are inferior, parasitic, and unworthy of full inclusion in the societies in which they live, many will respond angrily. Others, though, will come to believe those negative stereotypes, however subconsciously, and will inflict them on themselves and others in their group. That is called "internalized oppression," and it harms members of groups that face discrimination.

Internalized oppression can afflict us as individuals, too. I am reminded of the young woman whose older brother had driven her to school throughout her middle school years. On those rides, the younger sibling had heard her brother insult her intelligence. The brother didn't remember doing that; but when pressed, he acknowledged that he might have been condescending when his younger sister did not know things that, upon adult reflection, the brother realizes that he also didn't know when he was his sister's age. Whatever the case, the sister constantly compared herself to a brother who had three more years of life experience, not to mention education, and she increasingly thought herself to be stupid. She had

internalized the negativity heaped upon her by her brother, intended or not, and developed a destructive self-image as a result. She had internalized her oppression.

Rabbi Lauren Tuchman defines internalized oppression as “the notion that marginalized individuals tend to internalize many of society’s most degrading or negative ideas about them, including some of the most pernicious stereotypes about aptitude, ability, and feelings of belonging. Internalized oppression can lead to chronically low self-esteem.”ⁱⁱ

Rabbi Tuchman points to an example: the enslaved Israelites in Egypt who, in this week’s Torah portion, cannot listen to Moses’s promises of liberation because “their spirits [are] crushed by cruel bondage.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Israelites have internalized the Egyptian persecution to the point that they are no longer able to think of themselves as worthy of liberation. Rabbi Tuchman writes, “Our environmental reality shapes our imaginative possibility, as do the beliefs we have about ourselves, internalized from our families, communities, and educational institutions. If one believes oneself to be inherently inferior, dispensable, and unimportant, redemption feels like a fantasy at best.”^{iv}

Here in Arkansas, and not only in Arkansas, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are faced with consistent degradation, increasingly in the form of official government action. In 2021, the Arkansas General Assembly adopted two laws restricting the rights of transgender folks. These laws specifically target those most likely to internalize their oppression, namely young people. These assaults have been perpetuated by school boards whose minds are literally in the toilet, as they adopt restrictions on which bathroom transgender students may use. Now that the legislature is back in session, our lawmakers are devising new ways to oppress transgender people, including by classifying the public appearance of a transgender person to be adult entertainment—that is, pornographic. Even if federal courts stand in the way of the implementation of some of these laws, as is the case so far with the ban on gender-affirming healthcare for minors, transgender people, especially youth, will get the message: You are not wanted here. There’s something wrong with you. You are deviant. And some of them, at least, will internalize their oppression.

They will be in good company, and not only that of Andre Aciman’s Uncle Vili and Aunt Clara. Moses, too, suffers. Rabbi Tuchman explores the dynamics when Moses cites his speech impediment as a reason that God ought not send him to demand the Israelites’ freedom. Moses asks, “How then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!”^v God’s response is to provide Aaron as his brother Moses’s spokesperson. Rabbi Tuchman calls this “a reasonable accommodation.”

She writes, “Significantly, this accommodation does not diminish Moses’s role but instead allows Moses to bring his whole self to his holy work.”^{vi}

Even more enlightening is God’s reaction to Moses’s complaint about his speech impediment in last week’s portion, which is particularly poignant in the words Rabbi Tuchman uses to retell it: “God reminds Moses and all of us that we are each created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image: Who made you as you are, whether you are blind, deaf, have a mobility impairment, a speech impediment, or perhaps an intellectual disability? Maybe you are neurodiverse. You are part of My creation, God says emphatically. And to Moses specifically, after providing the aforementioned accommodation, God demands: Now go and do this holy work.”^{vii}

As we speak, we at Congregation B’nai Israel are working on a reasonable accommodation for the transgender and gender nonbinary folks among us. Our House and Grounds Committee is working with Eileen Hamilton to create an all-gender bathroom. It would be worth spending significant funds to do that, but we are fortunate to be able to do so relatively inexpensively, since we have a preschool restroom no longer used for that purpose that we can retrofit. We will of course not require transgender or nonbinary people to use that restroom, nor will we restrict it to their use. Anybody may use whichever restroom at Temple is appropriate for them.

Just as some people are created with the disabilities Rabbi Tuchman lists, so are some people created transgender or gender nonbinary. Reasonable accommodations enable **everyone** to participate at school, in the workplace, at Temple, and throughout society exactly as they have been created. Moreover, these accommodations send an implicit message: We want you here. You belong. Exactly the opposite message from the one that Uncle Vili and Aunt Clara had received from centuries of antisemitism and exactly the opposite message from the one that the Arkansas General Assembly and the Conway School Board send to transgender people. We must not perpetuate discrimination that leads to a panoply of harms, notably including internalized oppression. Instead, like Moses before them, may all hear: “Now go and do this holy work!”

Amen.

ⁱ Andre Aciman, *Out of Egypt*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007. These excerpts are from chapter one.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Lauren Tuchman, “Moses, Internalized Oppression, and Disability,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 83.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 6:9.

^{iv} Tuchman, p. 84.

^v Exodus 6:12.

^{vi} Tuchman, p. 84.

^{vii} Tuchman, pp. 84-85.