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## **Understanding Prejudice – A Psycho-Social Approach**

I like to start off each discussion with what I like to call the Why You Should Care section. We the consequences of prejudice left unchecked: the Armenian Genocide, Auschwitz, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, and Rwanda, to cite some examples. The question that I hope to tackle is where does prejudice come from and what if anything can be done about it.

I chose this topic at this particular time for a number of general reasons that and one very specific one. The general reasons are:

- I have always been interested in social psychology and I think that the study of prejudice illuminates certain areas of how we think and act as societal groups.
- Like so many Jews, I have always tried to understand how the Holocaust could take place and the prejudices that led so many Germans to become “Hitler’s willing executioners” as Daniel Jonah Goldhagen has called them. For me and for many of us, the topic is personal.
- In 2008, America had some of the most frank national discussions on race and prejudice. I think that the jury is still out on how much actually changed as a result of these discussions, but at least we began a dialogue.
- The topic seems to align with our discussion of the Ethiopian Jewish community.

The specific reason is perhaps more important and came out of our discussion *Common Ground*, where it seems that mistrust more than any other reason keeps the Palestinian and Israeli peoples apart. How ironic is it that a bitter struggle, lasting for over 60 years, takes place between two peoples with similar language, similar religions (as one of my Muslim friends pointed out recently, with the notable exception of the Prophet Muhammad, all the prophets in the Quran are Jewish) and even similar dietary rules?

Multiple studies have shown that the majority of both peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, agree on the same solution, but don't think that it will ever happen because the other side are either all terrorists or fascists, depending on your allegiance. There are at 15 million people involved; how "convenient" to be able to assign them all into two buckets.

Let us begin to address the problem systematically by defining prejudice, trying to understand the complex physical, religious and social influences and then address what we might be able to do about.

### **Definition:**

The dictionary definition of prejudice is:

*A preconceived judgment or opinion; an adverse opinion or leaning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge; an instance of such judgment or opinion; an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics.*<sup>1</sup>

The last part is the most germane to our discussion.

The social psychological definition of prejudice is slightly different. "Although social scientists often differ in the precise way they define "prejudice," most agree that **it involves a prejudgment, usually negative, about a group or its members.** As commonly used in psychology, prejudice is not merely a statement of opinion or belief, but an attitude that includes feelings such as **contempt, dislike, or loathing.**"<sup>2</sup>

Other related terms are stereotyping and discrimination. The word stereotype originally referred to a printing process used to create reproductions, it was later extended to mean an "image in the mind", which came to mean how we think about things or people. It then became used to express a generalization and specifically an overgeneralization. That is an important part of prejudice, the concept that all members of a group have a **certain quality or set of qualities** and that these qualities alone overshadow any other qualities that individual members of the group may have. Under the Nuremberg Laws, to cite an extreme example, a person who was one quarter Jewish was

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prejudice>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.understandingprejudice.org/apa/english/>

deprived of their most fundamental rights, despite between three quarters non-Jewish. It was this “taint” of the blood that was preeminent.

Continuing with the definition, there is also considerable agreement that prejudice is learned, that it is not innate. While I hope that this is true, because it then implies that it can be unlearned, I have often asked myself why it is then so universal. Why is it present in every culture? That brings us the issue of whether we have a predisposition toward prejudice.

### **Judging a Book By It's Cover**

The most fundamental question in human psychology is the question of what qualities are genetic and what qualities are environmental or learned. The question is often posed as psyche versus soma or nature versus nurture. Further there is a theory that **ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny**<sup>3</sup>, or more simply that each one of us goes through cycles similar to what we, as mankind, have gone through. Five dollar words aside, if you want to understand all of us, study one of us.

Babies are born into a bewildering chaos. During the time in the womb, they are largely without external stimulus. Our most fundamental sense is sight, with large portions of our brain devoted to interpreting what we see. Living in a universe without light or motion, their eyes are undeveloped at birth. So too are the areas of the brain that will later interpret visual stimulation. After birth, the senses and the areas of the cortex that will make sense of the data continue to develop until age five or six.

At birth, the pupils are unable to dilate fully, the retina is not fully developed, babies are not able to fixate on objects and have a very limited ability to see colors. But this quickly changes. By three months babies are able to coordinate head and eye movements, they are attracted to black and white and yellow and red targets and are able to glance at smaller objects. By six months, they are able to hold objects in their hands and examine them. By nine months, they are able to distinguish new people from the familiar and are visually alert to them.<sup>4</sup>

What is germane to our topic is that there are certain things that we are all programmed us to see better than others. One study has shown that within

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recapitulation\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recapitulation_theory) the Meckel-Serres Law.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/ECLKC/encyclopedia/Enc08\\_Farroni-Menon\\_brain\\_en.pdf](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/ECLKC/encyclopedia/Enc08_Farroni-Menon_brain_en.pdf)

minutes after birth, new born infants are attracted to **face-like** patterns in preference to non-face-like. Only hours after birth, babies are able to discriminate between individual faces and will show a preference for their mother's face, both in reality and in video presentations. Indications are that there is a specific face-learning mechanism that is "hard-wired" into us. This is the process of filial imprinting that has been studied in birds and other animals. Filial imprinting is defined as "phase-sensitive learning (learning occurring at a particular age or a particular life stage) that is rapid and apparently independent of the consequences of behavior."<sup>5</sup> As early as seven months after birth, babies are able to distinguish categories, showing a marked preference for female over male faces.<sup>6</sup>

By as young as nine months, babies are able to distinguish race based on facial images. In a study of Caucasian babies, a preference was shown for a pattern containing a single Asian face among seven Caucasian faces over a pattern containing a single Caucasian face among seven Asian faces. The conclusion was reached that mechanisms of specialization in face processing originate very early in life, but perhaps more important was the preference for images of "a familiar kind."<sup>7</sup> Other studies show this preference as early as three months after birth.<sup>8</sup>

Let me now introduce the work of Samuel Ichiye (S.I.) Hayakawa. Hayakawa was a student of Alfred Korzybski<sup>9</sup>, who came to America from Poland during World War I. During that war, Korzybski served as an intelligence officer for the Russian army. After suffering a number of wounds, Korzybski came to North America to coordinate the shipments of artillery to the front. After the war, Korzybski would author a number of books and theories and is credited with founding the study of general semantics. The basic principle of general semantics is that the "map is not the territory" which means that the human mind develops internal, mental or psychological symbols that help us think about and work with the world around us.

Hayakawa built upon Korzybski's work to construct his Ladder of Abstraction<sup>10</sup>. In the Ladder of Abstraction, we move from the concrete and

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<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imprinting\\_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imprinting_(psychology))

<sup>6</sup> *The development of face processing in infancy and early childhood*, By Olivier Pascalis, Alan Slater

<sup>7</sup> <http://pbr.psychonomic-journals.org/content/16/2/270.refs?cited-by=yes&legid=psppbr:16/2/270>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=2566511>

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_Korzybski](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Korzybski)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.rijnlandmodel.nl/english/general\\_semantics/abstraction\\_ladder.htm](http://www.rijnlandmodel.nl/english/general_semantics/abstraction_ladder.htm)

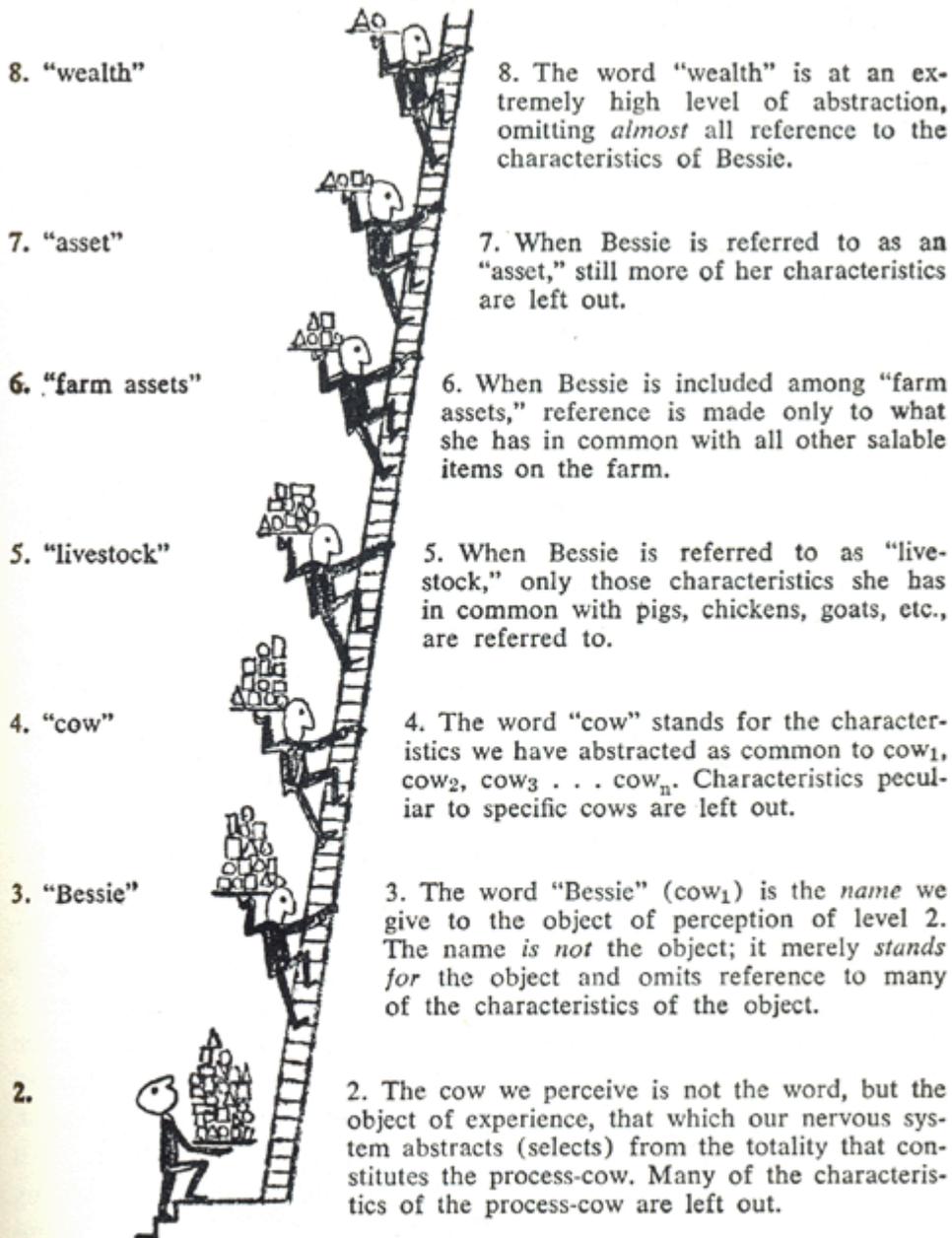
specific cow on a farm to the more abstract class of farm animals to the completely abstract concept of the cow being part of wealth.

Applying this concept to human perception, we move from the baby's identifying with the concrete and specific image of mother to the less concrete class of people who look like mother to the completely abstract identification with a race or nation.

What begins as a survival mechanism evolves into the identification with an abstract group. Mankind lived in small tribes and groups and it was important for survival for us, at early stages in our development when we were most dependent, to be able to pick out our mothers and other members of our tribe with whom we would presumably be safer than we would with outsiders. We used appearance and particularly facial appearance to make these selections. The next question that arises is how does a preference for one group, a group with whom we share facial characteristics, transform into a dislike and distrust of dissimilar groups?

## ABSTRACTION LADDER

Start reading from the bottom *UP*



1. The cow known to science ultimately consists of atoms, electrons, etc., according to present-day scientific inference. Characteristics (represented by circles) are infinite at this level and ever-changing. This is the *process level*.

## **Its All In Our Heads**

Having established that there are certain tendencies, propensities if you will, that are universal among people because of millions of years of survival-oriented evolution, how do we make the jump to prejudice? Given that we are programmed, hard-wired if you will, to recognize individuals and groups that are like us as being safe, is there a “prejudice gene” that we all carry?

I sincerely hope not. To make the leap to prejudice, we need to add culture, the nurture element, to the mix. In particular, I am going to focus on one element of culture, religion, to explain the origins of prejudice. At this point we turn to the work of two psychologists, Carl Jung and Jean Piaget.

Jung hypothesized that each of carries certain ancestral memories or archetypes within us. He especially focused on the following: the Child, the Hero, the Great Mother, the Wise Old Man and the Trickster or Fox.<sup>11</sup> Jung is credited with being the first psychologist to state that man is “by nature religious.”<sup>12</sup> Far from being anti-religious, Jung stressed the benefits of religion as a cure for the stresses and illnesses of modern life. However, Jung was confronted by a real dilemma when Germany, the neighbor of his Swiss homeland, became the Nazi state.

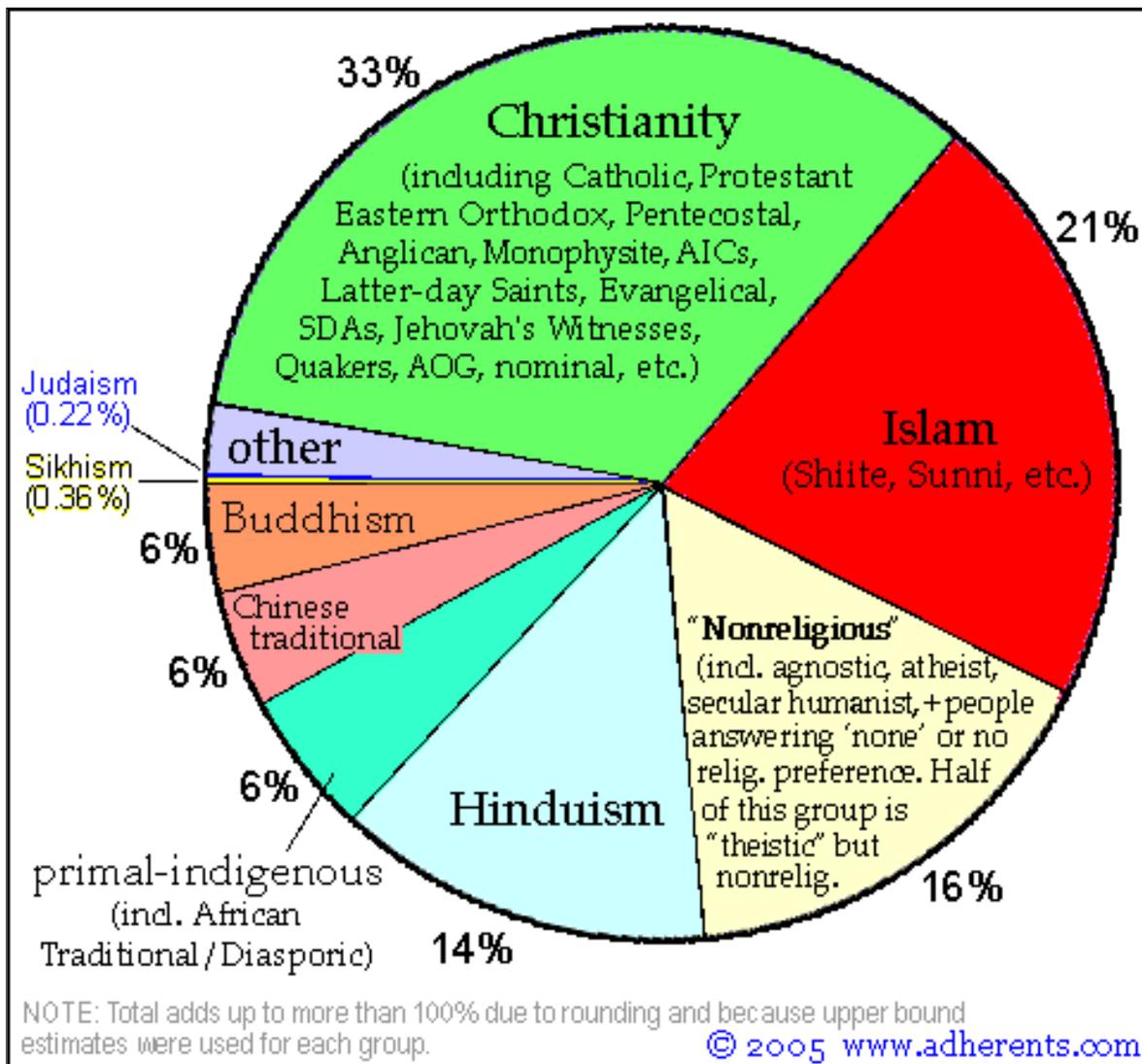
Jung was friends with and was mentored by the Jewish psychologist, Sigmund Freud. Jung’s work diverged from Freud in that Jung, who had studied deeply Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Taoism and other traditions, believed that each of us carries ancestral memories, which he called the collective unconscious, and that bringing these ancestral memories into consciousness has a holistic healing effect on mind and body. He called this process individuation<sup>13</sup>. Participation in religious ceremony is an important means of accomplishing this.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archetype>

<sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl\\_Jung](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Jung)

<sup>13</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individuation>



Before we go much further, let me comment on the universality of certain ceremonies. There is a tremendous variety of religious beliefs in the world. You have the major religions, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Membership in these four faiths account for almost 5 billion people. Add in Chinese traditional, Sikkism, Judaism, Baha'i, Jainism and Shinto and you have almost another half a billion people. There are another almost half billion people that maintain the ancient primal faiths, particularly in Africa. Compare that to around 1.1 billion who state that they are Secular, Non-religious, Agnostic or Atheist and you come to the conclusion that most people in the world are religious<sup>14</sup>. As varied as the beliefs are, you find that commonalities of ceremony: there is almost always some variation of assembly, usually in a circle, around a fire or candles; using wine, liquor or

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html)

other intoxicants, prayer or meditation to achieve an altered state of consciousness; and some form of collective singing or chant. These rituals harken back to humans earliest days in the caves and serve to create and reinforce a group identity. This sense of group identity is almost always exclusionary, defining the group but also separating the group from other groups.

There are few religions (Buddhism, Taoism and Shinto come to mind) that do not position themselves as being superior to all other religions.

Beginning in 1923, the Nazis began to hold annual rallies at Nuremberg. They lit fires and circled around them, drank intoxicants and sang and chanted in chorus. The similarity to religious ritual was not coincidental; the Nazis carried Martin Luther's *Von den Juden und Ihren Lügen* (*On the Jews and Their Lies*) as an inspirational text and Nazi architect Albert Speer would design a "Cathedral of Light" for Hitler to use when addressing the assembly<sup>15</sup>. (See picture below.)



The rise of an anti-Semitic, religious state created some conflicts for Jung. Through 1939, Jung maintained cordial relations with German psychotherapists who lent their support to the Nazis. But as early as 1936, in his essay "Wotan" Jung described Germany as "infected" by "one man who

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.bytwerk.com/gpa/rpt37.htm>

is obviously possessed" and described the German state as "rolling towards perdition." The essay does, however, speak in more positive terms of Jakob Wilhelm Hauer and his German Faith Movement which was loyal to the Führer. In a 1948 interview, Jung answered the charges of anti-Semitism that had been leveled against him:

“It must be clear to anyone who has read any of my books that I have never been a Nazi sympathizer and I never have been anti-Semitic, and no amount of misquotation, mistranslation, or rearrangement of what I have written can alter the record of my true point of view. Nearly every one of these passages [referring to a list of quotations cited against him] has been tampered with, either by malice or by ignorance. Furthermore, my friendly relations with a large group of Jewish colleagues and patients over a period of many years in itself disproves the charge of anti-Semitism.”

Jean Piaget is best known as a psychologist who studied children and constructed a theory of psychological development based on a series of stages. He also developed the concept of “genetic epistemology” which “attempts to explain knowledge, and in particular scientific knowledge, on the basis of its history, its socio-genesis, and especially the psychological origins of the notions and operations upon which it is based.” In a brief summary, Piaget used children’s responses to a series of interview questions to chart the transformation of their thinking from intuitive and highly individual to scientific and socially acceptable. He concluded that we move from a position of egocentrism, where we are at the center of the universe, to socio-centrism, where our society is the focus. He further stated that intellectual activity is part of the biological process of adaptation, consisting of two parts, assimilation and accommodation. To summarize, what we think, even scientific thought, is effected by the society in which we live.

Michael Horace Barnes extended Piaget’s theories and the theories of other Piaget students to show a parallelism between the development of religion and science<sup>16</sup>. Individual development effects cultural development and vice versa. I accept some parts of the theory, but not others. To my mind, science and intellectual thought is always forward looking, while religious thought tends to be backward looking. One becomes a scientist or a philosopher to discover the next big thing; religion attempts to explain what happened in the past and references the prophets of the past.

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<sup>16</sup> **Stages of Thought**, By Michael Horace Barnes

One of the most important things to take from the Piaget school is the importance of how we raise our children in determining the future of our society: “only education is capable of saving our societies from possible collapse, whether violent, or gradual.”

### **The Things That You Are Liable To Read In the Bible...**

If our thoughts and attitudes are formed and constrained by the culture of the societies in which we live and if religion is an important part of that culture, how is prejudice a part of religion? Let’s go “old school” and start with the Old Testament, the Bible.

As we have discussed in the past, the Noah story was first recorded in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh as the story of Utnapishtim, the first hero of the Flood. Carl Jung would say that both are representations of the same archetype that exists in our collective unconscious. But whereas Utnaphishtim ascends to divinity after surviving the Flood, it is the story of Noah after the flood that provides a rationale for prejudice in the Bible. Noah has three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. It was accepted as fact by Judeo-Christians until about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that all the nations of the world were descended from these three. Ham was the forefather of the southern peoples who lived in “Hamitic” Africa. Shem was the forefather of the peoples of the Middle East, who are still referred to as Semitic. Japheth was the forefather of the northern Eurasian peoples<sup>17</sup>.

Ham and all his descendants are cursed because Ham “saw” his father Noah naked. In Genesis 9:20 we have the following story:

20 And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: 21 And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. 22 And Ham, the father of Canaan, **saw** the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. 23 And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. 24 And Noah awoke from his wine, and **knew what his younger son had done unto him**. 25 And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. 26 And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and **Canaan shall be his servant**. 27 God shall

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<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sons\\_of\\_Noah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sons_of_Noah)

enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and **Canaan shall be his servant.**

The story above provides justification for the conquest and enslavement of the people of the land of Canaan by the returning Israelis after the time of their enslavement in Egypt. Later the same story would be cited as the justification for the enslavement of the dark-skinned descendents of Ham, father of Canaan, which refers to the peoples of Africa. Since the African slaves were often converted to the Judeo-Christian faith, even they often accepted the story.

There is a Biblical interpretation that Ham's sin was more than visual; that he engaged in a sexual act with his unconscious father. The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 108b states "Our Rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished — the dog, the raven, and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven expectorates, and Ham was smitten in his skin." Although Ham is not explicitly cursed in the Genesis section above, it was taken that the dark skin of the African peoples was the result of the curse. Thus the African peoples were not only unclean by virtue of the sin being passed down from generation to generation, but they were intended by G-d to be slaves.

The story may not be real but the consequences certainly were. Generations of Jewish and Christian men could go to their synagogue or church to worship the Lord and then go home and abuse their dark-skinned slaves with a clear conscience. We have the justification for racism.

Among human beings, the commonly accepted definition of race is "race or racial group usually refers to the categorization of humans into populations or groups on the basis of various sets of heritable characteristics."<sup>18</sup> However there is considerable debate as to whether this definition has any real meaning. From the American Anthropological Association web page: "Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation lies within so-called racial groups. This means that there is greater variation within 'racial' groups than between them."<sup>19</sup>

To explain how nonsensical yet dangerous racism can be we only need to look at the ethnic cleansing of between 800,000 and 1 million Tutsis by their

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<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race\\_\(classification\\_of\\_human\\_beings\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_(classification_of_human_beings))

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.aaanet.org/\\_cs\\_upload/cmtes/minority/23697\\_1.pdf](http://www.aaanet.org/_cs_upload/cmtes/minority/23697_1.pdf)

Hutu neighbors in Rwanda. I would offer that no one in this room could tell the difference between Hutu and Tutsi, yet the differences were a matter of life and death in Rwanda.

The justification for two thousand years of anti-Semitism can be found in several verses of the Gospels. Jesus speaking to a group of Pharisees: "I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father. They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did. ... You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is you are not of God."<sup>20</sup>

In Matthew 27:25 the Jews of Jerusalem cry out for Jesus' crucifixion and say "His blood be on us, and on our children"<sup>21</sup>. This verse was often used as the justification for atrocities against the Jews, who were taken to be the very descendants of those Jews who had committed deicide.

In Revelation 3:9, Stephen is quoted as saying "Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie — behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you"<sup>22</sup>.

I could go on and quote more from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Quran. But at the end, these are just words on pages. It is our human choice to obey them, to raise ourselves up by putting others down that gives rise to prejudice. We find something in these words that strikes a chord in ourselves.

Religion provides one means of dividing the world into categories. For the early Jews, religion was synonymous with tribal identity, hence the term the

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<sup>20</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisemitism\\_in\\_the\\_New\\_Testament](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisemitism_in_the_New_Testament)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

Chosen People, rather than the “peoples.” Outsiders included other tribes and other races, which were deemed by G-d to be inferior. By the Middle Ages, both Christianity and Islam included multiple tribes and races. In the religious wars of that time, Normans and Franks, who might be enemies at home, would make common cause against Arabs and Berbers. By the Age of Enlightenment, national identity became paramount. Religion, tribal identity, race and national identity all have the capability to unite people and also to divide peoples.

I will offer you one last reading, which I think is very pertinent to today’s situation in the Middle East:

***Read from “The Man in the Glass Booth” page 75.***

Three months after the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the real Man in the Glass Booth, began in Jerusalem, Stanley Milgram began his famous experiment on obedience to authority. He posed the following question "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?" His answer was as follows:

“I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.”

It should also be noted that Milgram was also administering a paper and pencil test, the California F-Scale developed by Theodor Adorno et al. The F-scale, where “F” stood for “Fascism” was a test developed to measure authoritarian personality. Adorno, an escapee from Nazi Europe, was studying anti-Semitism and was trying to develop a measure to identify

which people would be likely to commit atrocities. After the Milgram experiment we knew the answer: all of us.

### **Summary**

There is an innate propensity in the human animal to identify with members of our families, our tribes, our groups. We are visually aligned with people that we are exposed to from birth, identifying by look. We prefer them over the “others.” This is our propensity for prejudice.

Mankind has divided itself up along clan, tribal, racial, religious and national lines at various times. Most of these distinctions are arbitrary and often fictional. However, as documented by Jane Elliot’s Brown Eyes/Blue Eyes exercise<sup>23</sup> even arbitrary distinctions have the capacity to divide human beings in ways that are very real and sometimes with horrific consequences.

Education and exposure to different groups, especially at early ages, is the best way to combat prejudice.

We must constantly be on the guard against authorities that lend weight to prejudice.

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<sup>23</sup> A Class Divided (1984) film