

## Tikkun Olam

By Brandon Springer

If Malcolm X or Fannie Lou Hamer were alive today, what would they say about the state of race and racism in America? What would Simone de Beauvoir have to say about the oppressed status of women? For that matter, what do the feminists still fighting the good fight have to say about the state of gender relations in America? What would Audre Lorde or Harvey Milk have to say about the state of heterosexism in America? What would Che Guevara say about class stratification? What does oppression look like in America today? In a multicultural America, in the age of Obama, the most important question is, what does social justice look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? A 21<sup>st</sup> century notion of social justice needs to be cognizant of all forms of systematic oppression, how and where they intersect, and what we can do to solve them.

Many young progressives evoke notions of common humanity by arguing that we are “all the same,” or “we’re all just human.” This can be a well-meant sentiment; however, it denies the existence of privilege in American society. The truth of the matter is, yes, we are all human, but we are different. We are not all the same, and it is OK to admit this. In fact, it is *necessary* to admit this. For many it is insulting to disregard these differences with the notion that we are all the same. Audre Lorde wrote “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate these differences.”<sup>i</sup> She wrote these words decades ago, but they still have fundamental implications for answering the question of what does social justice mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century struggle to build a *truly* multicultural society? Recognize, accept and celebrate. These words characterize what it means to be socially just, what it means to fight for multiculturalism.

### **Recognize**

Until humanity reaches the state in which an organic multiculturalism exists, to form a true multicultural society, one that scholars such as Peter McLaren<sup>ii</sup> and Reiland Rabaka<sup>iii</sup> would call a “critical multiculturalism,” we must start with recognition. We tend to ignore differences rather

than transcend, or rise above, them – thus, we see the notion and movement of colorblindness. Many white youth -- to whom non-white people are more an idea than a reality, as Tricia Rose<sup>iv</sup> would say – are failing to critically engage the differences of humanity they encounter. That is to say, we *fear* conversations about identity; we fear discussing the very things that make us different, because we fear difference. More than that, we fear acknowledging our own privileges and, perhaps, our own prejudices. So we put on blinders and in a false notion of progressivism many pretend that race and racism simply do not exist. That gender and patriarchy do not exist. Social justice trainer Jessica Pettit says “By claiming to be ‘color blind’; and supporting the claim that ‘we are all equal’ it is much easier to remain oblivious to the group-based privileges from which many of us derive benefit.”<sup>v</sup> It is easier to blame the victims of oppression than to acknowledge privilege. The solution then is to recognize our own various identities, and the various identities of others as individuals, and what social capital and privilege we gain from, or are *denied* by, these identities. Only then can we move on to acceptance.

### **Accept**

Seventh-grader Johnny from Daniel Webster Middle School in Los Angeles is gay. He is one of many young middle-schoolers across the country coming out in a more accepting environment. Johnny’s middle school may have been an accepting atmosphere, but his home was not. Johnny’s mother says that he is not to bring his boyfriend over to the house. “She’s like ‘O.K., I accept you, but you better not bring any of those people around,’” Johnny told *New York Times* reporter Benoit Denizet-Lewis<sup>vi</sup>. Johnny’s mother’s attitude is a palpable example of what I term *false acceptance*. This occurs across the spectrum of identities, but is more profound in those identities that must be revealed to others, such as sexual orientation. It is accepting while simultaneously rejecting. It avoids the subject of identity. Another example, a young woman identifying as lesbian decides to come out to her best friend. This is the first person she comes out to. ‘I’m gay,’ the young woman says. The knee-jerk reaction of the supportive best friend is to reply, ‘I don’t care that you’re gay.’ On the surface, this seems to be an appropriate response, but

it is bittersweet. While the young women may be relieved by the lack of negative reaction, inside she wonders to herself, “well it matters to me – I care – this is who I am – this is my identity – why doesn’t she care?” It is an offshoot of the problem of colorblindness. The response of a better ally is to show caring, to accept on a more profound level. It is superficial to simply say, “I accept you.” We work toward a more socially just society when we have tough conversations about identity; when we ask hard questions of each other, when we make connections with each other. W.E.B. Du Bois notes famously that the ultimate tragedy of humanity is “not that men are poor, — all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked,—who is good? not that men are ignorant, — what is Truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men.”<sup>vii</sup> Where we fail in the fight for multiculturalism, in our drive for acceptance, is that we do not make the effort to know each other for all that we are. This leads us to the notion of celebration.

### **Celebrate**

More often than not, notions of acceptance are used interchangeably with those of tolerance. This is destructive. What does it mean to be tolerant, to tolerate? To endure. To stomach. To tolerate is to bite one’s tongue, avert one’s eyes and *suffer* the presence of those who are different. “Difference must be not merely tolerated,” Audre Lorde writes, “but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark.”<sup>viii</sup> For multiculturalism to flourish, we must teach as Lorde says, celebration not toleration. This becomes the hardest part of the triumvirate. How do we celebrate difference? How do we celebrate without singling out, without tokenizing? Lorde would tell us that we should celebrate our differences “as a creative force toward change.”<sup>ix</sup> But what does that mean? What do we do?

There is celebration in showing solidarity. There is celebration in activism, in “walking the talk.” Ultimately, however, the celebration is in education. The final step to achieving true multiculturalism, the celebration of our differences, is education. In “Teaching to Transgress,”<sup>x</sup> bell hooks writes that this education must reject the tokenization of difference that occurs in many universities and departments and instead embrace a “transformative pedagogy” that eradicates the

notion of students as “passive consumers” by creating a democratic space in the classroom in which everyone feels a responsibility to contribute. In this setting, no student is invisible. “To hear each other (the sound of *different* voices),” hooks writes, “to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition.” In such a setting, identity is front and center and difference is celebrated. Hooks writes that “we can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly libratory liberal arts education.” Thus does celebration through education lead to liberation. Teaching, then, is not the realm of those who cannot “do.” Rather, it is the highest calling of the multicultural society.

As Patricia Hill Collins teaches us, systems of oppression are interlocking and interconnected<sup>xi</sup>. To analyze one of these problems, we must analyze all of these problems. Lorde calls these systems of oppression (racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia) “forms of human blindness,” as she calls them, that are “essentially an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self.”<sup>xii</sup> Embedded in ideals of political correctness and colorblindness, systems of oppression are only perpetuated. To rid the world of oppression, to create a genuinely multicultural and socially just society, how I as a Reconstructionist Jew would define Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World), we must open our eyes. We must open our hearts and minds to the differences that run between us. As in everything we teach, regardless of the subject matter, we must teach bell hooks’ transformative pedagogy. We must have tough conversations. We must make real connections. We must, as Audre Lorde teaches us, recognize, accept and celebrate.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Tang, Yongming and Joiner, Charles W. *Synergic Inquiries*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2006, Pg. 5.

<sup>ii</sup> McLaren, Peter. “White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Toward a Critical Multiculturalism.” *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference*. Eds. Christine E. Sleeter and Peter McLaren. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, 33-71.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabaka, Reiland. *Du Bois’s Dialectics: Black Radical Politics and the Reconstruction of Critical Social Theory*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008.

<sup>iv</sup> Rose, Tricia. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – and Why it Matters*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008, pg. 231.

<sup>v</sup> Pettit, Jessica. “Social Justice: When Diversity Isn’t Enough”

<sup>vi</sup> Denizet-Lewis, Benoit. “Coming Out in Middle School” *The New York Times*. Sunday Magazine. The School Issue: Junior High. 23 Sept. 2009.

<sup>vii</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. “The Souls of Black Folk.” New York: Penguin, 1989, Pg. 185.

<sup>viii</sup> Lorde, Audre. “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” (1978)

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American Queer. Eds. David Shneer and Caryn Aviv. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006; 5-8.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid. Pg. 70.

<sup>x</sup> hooks, bell. "Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom." New York: Rutledge, 1994, Pg. 35-44.

<sup>xi</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment Revised Tenth Anniversary Edition." New York: Rutledge, 2000.

<sup>xii</sup> Lorde, Audre. "Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches" New York: The Crossing Press, 1984, Pg. 45.

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