

Sermon for Temple Emanuel – November 15, 2024
By Ellen Schaefer-Salins

Ableism, Audism and Microaggressions

Thank you, Rabbi Adam for inviting me to speak to the congregation. I will be talking about Microaggressions today and to do that we need to look at people's identities. So I will be using mostly myself to talk about my identities and microaggressions that I have faced. But I also want to focus on microaggressions that come from Ableism – discrimination toward people with disabilities. And Audism – Discrimination toward people who are Deaf and hard of hearing. That is AUD like audiology. And a microaggression is a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group.

So let's begin by looking at identities. I am Ellen Schaefer-Salins and like all of you, I have many identities. The Rabbi asked me to speak to you due to my professional identities. I am a mental health therapist who has worked with clients who are deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind, for over 40 years. And yes, I am fluent in American Sign Language or ASL. And I am an Associate Professor of Social Work at Salisbury University on the Eastern Shore of Maryland where I set up a Deaf Studies Minor and a Disability Studies Minor for undergraduate students. I have also been a member of this temple since 1997. And I am a mother, grandmother, friend, aunt,

neighbor, a widow, and an Alice in Wonderland book and teapot collector. We will save the Alice stories for another time....

And my identities continue as I am a woman, I'm white, I'm Jewish, I'm cis-gendered, I'm heterosexual, I'm in the older generation (though I thought I was middle aged until my children corrected me), I can hear or I am "hearing" which is an important identity to tell people in the deaf community, I am blind in one eye, and I am a citizen of the United States. And the list can go on and on.

So I am using myself as an example of the importance to look at the whole person before making any assumptions about someone. Everyone is so complex. In my role or identity as a Social Work Professor, I teach a social work course called Privilege and Oppression. In this course we discuss many of the identity groups I have just mentioned, and we look at what groups are privileged, and which are oppressed in our country. For example, I teach about white privilege and how still in 2024 there is a great deal of discrimination toward people of color. As a white person I am not scared when I am stopped by the police for traffic violations, I can find Band-Aids that match my skin tone, and people are not suspicious of me when I walk in a group with my friends who mostly look like me.

But I also have identities that cause me oppression. I am Jewish. I do not have days off from work on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover. Yet my Christian friends and relatives have a federal holiday to be off for

Christmas. Wait, I thought there was separation of church and state? That's an easy example of Jews being in the minority. The many, many harder examples are also for another talk....

In my course I discuss different identities every week and what groups face privilege and which groups face oppression in the United States. We discuss racism, sexism, classism, religion, gender identity, who people are attracted to romantically and sexually, and citizenship. And we discuss identities of Ability/Disability since that is an identity that deals with a great deal of oppression. In the class I talk about the privilege that able bodied people have or TABs, temporarily abled bodied people as the disability community calls them. The identity of disability is one that the majority of us will obtain at some point in our life, especially as we get older.

Think about the lens that we look at people with disabilities through. To do that I am going to say you a short list of the privileges for able bodied people because you may have never realized that you have these privileges. Think about this list with YOU as the "I".

1. I can visit any of my friends' homes without worrying if I can get up the steps to the door.
2. I can turn on the television and easily understand what is being said during TV shows, movies, and commercials.
3. I can easily read my mail and see what is on the computer or on my phone.

4. I can be assured that assumptions about my mental capabilities will not be made based on my physical status, or the way I speak
5. I can swear, dress sloppily, or even be in a bad mood without people attributing it to my disability.
6. People do not tell me that my ability level means that I should not have children. They will be happy for me when I or my partner become pregnant, and I can easily find supportive medical professionals and parents like me.
7. I can do well in challenging situations very often without being told what an inspiration I must be to other able-bodied people like me.

When I tell this list to my students, I normally get comments of shock. They never realized the privileges they have. Not working to address these issues just mentioned leads to Ableism. Again, Ableism is prejudice or discrimination against individuals with disabilities. And we all know that prejudice means thoughts based on unfounded and unrealistic opinions. And discrimination is the action based on those thoughts. Working with people in the Deaf community, I hear about Audism (AUD) a lot which means an attitude based on pathological thinking that results in a negative stigma toward anyone who does not hear. Audism judges, labels, and limits individuals based on whether a person hears and speaks. There is also linguistism which is discrimination toward people who talk differently such as people who are deaf or have, cerebral palsy, and people with accents. I'm sure you have

a different impression of a person with a British accent than a person with a stutter.

My university, Salisbury University, has an ableist and audist environment and I have been pointing it out to them ever since I have been there. The university has accessible entrances to buildings with ramps and a button for automatic doors, but classroom doors are often very heavy and hard to open. I know of one student with a physical disability who was stuck in his classroom several times because he could not open the heavy classroom door and the professor and other students, did not make sure that the student left the class before they did.

Another student who became hard of hearing right before starting college, asked her Organic Chemistry professor if she could have a reserved seat in the front of the room and if he could face her as much as possible while speaking. She had approval of these accommodations from the Disability Resource Center. The professor said he would not change how he teaches and that she should withdraw from his class. She did not withdraw and at the end of the semester she had the highest grade in the course.

I have asked for open captioning and ASL interpreters at large university events and trainings. Open captioning which are captions that all can see on a screen like with a foreign movie, increases accessibility for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, have cognitive impairments, or learning disabilities. Recently the President of the University emailed me to say that there would be an ASL

interpreter at her well attended in-person State of the University address, but to have open captioning shown on the screen with her slide show was not possible with the computer program she was using for the presentation. This means that if you attended her address in person, there would not be captioning on the screen for accessibility, you could only see captions if you watched online with Zoom. I emailed back to say that it is terrible that her staff did not make sure that the program they picked for the presentation had open captioning so that better accessibility would be provided for all whether online or in person. Accessibility should have been thought of at the beginning of preparing for her presentation, not at the end... I do still have a job and amazingly received an apology. So I am using my place of work to show you prejudice and discrimination toward people with disabilities. Accessibility and understanding of the needs of people with disabilities is not a priority and has led to deaf professors leaving, and inaccessibility in classrooms and at campus events. I am constantly advocating for things to change, and I will give the university credit that they are changing. A new Vice President of Diversity and Accessibility was just hired this Fall so that should be a huge help.

So what is a microaggression? A microaggression is a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group. But the results of those comments or actions can be very impactful and hurtful. And they happen all the time. I say microaggressions to

people and everyone in this room says microaggressions too. That is why it is important to know what they are and how to be more aware and sensitive about them.

Microaggressions are the result of very ingrained teachings that are learned from family, school, church, synagogue, mosque, Tik Tok, television, friends and more. Even the torah teaches ableist ideals. The torah explains that, “The LORD talked to Moses and said, “... any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred *face* or any *limb* too long ‘a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, ‘or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or *a man* who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch. ... shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I the LORD sanctify them.’ (Lev. 21:16–23)¹

The torah also protects people with disabilities as it says “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” In today’s Torah portion, Abraham is speaking with the LORD about standing up for marginalized people. But in general, the Torah and the Hebrew Bible are very ableist or prejudice toward people with disabilities. And writings and thoughts like this continue broadly today.

Microaggressions come from people’s racist, sexist, ableist, and homophobic ideals that have been ingrained in them throughout their lives. And all of you have these ingrained ideals too. Women are expected to be teachers

and nurses, not scientists. Short people or a person with a disability are not expected to be the CEO of an organization. People should marry someone of the “opposite gender”. And a woman of color should not be the leader of our country. I strongly feel that ingrained thought in our country had a great impact on our election. When I was young I was taught to sit Indian style which taught young children a stereotype. That has thankfully changed to sitting Cris-Cross Applesauce now. And sayings such as “to Jew it down” during bartering with a merchant continues stereotypes too. This is the lens that we are taught and how people see the world even if they disagree with this lens.

When I was setting up the Deaf Studies Minor, I explained the importance of hiring deaf professors to teach classes in the minor. A professor on the committee helping to set up the minor said this microaggression: “It would be hard to hire deaf professors since our adjunct professors have to have at least a Masters degree or preferably a PhD to teach.” I was stunned and said, “Many deaf people have PhDs and Maters degrees.” The professor I was talking to looked shocked because she had an assumption about what a deaf person could or could not do. And the same professor did not feel it is important to hire deaf professors to teach in the minor, but hiring deaf professors is important as it is a form of representation. Would you have all male professors teach in a Women’s Studies Minor? Another example of a microaggression was from a professor I work with who is a close friend of mine. She teaches diversity courses and is African American. I went

to her office to check on her during mid-terms when we are all very busy. When asked how she was doing she replied, “Whoa, I’m slaving like a Hebrew.” After hearing her comment, I felt like I had been hit in the chest and I must have had a look on my face. She asked what was wrong. She did not realize that she had said anything wrong as it was a phrase she had heard growing up and she never thought about the actual meaning of it. It was a microaggression that was hurtful but the intent behind it was not to be hurtful at all. People say microaggressions all the time. When they say them they often do not realize how it has impacted another person. And most of the time people do not respond to the microaggression but they are hurt by it.

Here are a few more ableist or audist microaggressions: “You speak well for a deaf person.” This may sound like a compliment but for many deaf people it tells them that they are only thought of positively if they can speak. All their other identities of work, family, education and more don’t matter. “Oh you can drive?” “You have children?” “You are a lawyer? Wow, how can there be deaf lawyers?” As a therapist who works in the deaf community, I am told about microaggressions that my clients deal with regularly. And most microaggressions deal with people thinking that if you are deaf, blind, or have a physical disability then you are also cognitively impaired. And if a person does have a cognitive impairment, then people assume that they have poor work skills and social skills period and don’t look for their many positive attributes. Everyone is different and it

is so important to get to know someone so that there are no assumptions.

For microaggression with religion I've heard, "You are Jewish? I'm sorry you don't believe in Christ. You seem like such a nice person." When I heard this comment, I don't think the person who said it felt they were being hurtful. They were saying what was part of their learning in life and the comment was said in a "nice way" to me.

Intention and impact. Those are the terms that are important with microaggressions. People say things that could impact one person but maybe not another person. For example, I have faced microaggressions here at Temple Emanuel. You would think this is a safe haven for me and it mostly is when it comes to religion. But I have faced sexism here. When my younger daughter was coming for Hebrew school and Bat Mitzvah tutoring, I was working on my PhD. I would go to the temple library and study while she was in class. One time a woman asked me what I was working on, I said I was writing my dissertation for my PhD. She looked surprised and asked what degree my husband had. I replied, "He has a bachelor's degree." Then the woman asked "How does your husband *feel* about you getting a PhD?" I said he was very happy for me. Then I was asked what the PhD was in. I replied it is a PhD in Social Work. "Oh just Social Work! Oh! Well good luck..." And she walked away. I believe she was trying to make small talk and was not trying to hurt me. But what I heard is that a woman should not get a degree higher than her husband and I heard that

a PhD in social work was not a worthwhile or difficult degree to pursue. I don't think that was the woman's intention for me to feel that way but it was certainly the impact for me. Another person may have heard that differently so the impact can be different to different people. I have faced a lot of sexism in my family of origin, and it hits me particularly hard.

But a microaggression can be blatant and purposeful too. This is called a macroaggression. About 7 years ago I was in the Dallas airport coming home from a Social Work Conference. I was in line waiting to go through airport security. An older white man dressed in cowboy boots and a cowboy hat was behind me in line and complaining that the Pre-Check lines were all closed. He was upset to be waiting in the regular security line. After chatting about the weather, we finally got near the security gate. He said to me, "Wow, we waited a half hour in line just because of those damn Muslims." I was shocked. He had assumed I would be Ok with that awful statement by looking at my identity of a white woman at a Dallas airport. And he had learned stereotypes about people who are Muslim. After feeling like I was punched in the chest again, I surprised myself and replied that there is more terrorism in this country by white Christian men than anyone Muslim, and how dare he say that. And I have two Muslim daughters who are lot more decent and moral than he is." I was then called up by security to show my ID and I never saw the shocked man again. That was a purposeful macroaggression that he assumed he would get support for. Surprise! By the way, my Muslim daughters are two

foreign exchange students who lived with us for a year each. We had one student from Turkey and later another student from Pakistan. And I would not have felt comfortable to have confronted this man if I was not in a security line at an airport. I figured he did not have a gun and could not do much harm to me there.

So be careful about those ingrained feeling and ideas about people and don't assume anything about anyone, really ever. People with disabilities say that their biggest barriers are the people who make negative assumptions about them ALL DAY LONG. Microaggressions are like mosquito bites. One doesn't hurt that much but many can start to hurt a lot and hurt a person's self-concept and self-esteem. And there are also microaggressions happening within oppressed groups such as the woman who was sexist to me at the temple, but again that is for another talk....

Think about how those biases impact what you say to a person. "That is wonderful that you are working on your PhD." would have been nicer to hear than "Oh, your PhD is just in social work." Also consider the impact of your actions. Never move a person in a wheelchair without their permission. Let a blind person take *your* arm if they request to be guided so they have the control. Let a deaf person tell you their preferred way to communicate with you which could include writing or texting in addition to talking or signing. And think before you talk. Ask a person for more information and compliment them on their accomplishments. "I am always impressed when I learn

that someone is a lawyer”, is better to say than “There are deaf lawyers?”

So again, check on and understand your ingrained biases. Think about what you are saying and your actions. Stop the assumptions, the microaggressions, the macroaggressions, the prejudice and the discrimination, and be kind to all! Especially with the direction that our country is going in right now and the permission that people are being given to be prejudice and discriminatory, it is so very important to be understanding, kind, and respectful to all!

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom!