



Jewish Justice Resources

BY AJWS

Purim, Prejudice and the Dangers of a “Single Story”

A Text Study

INTRODUCTION

The stories we tell about each other matter. Social media now allows governments, military groups and private citizens to share false and defamatory information about ethnic and religious minorities. In one of the starkest examples, [Facebook was used by the Burmese military to foment anti-Muslim sentiment that resulted in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people from Burma](#). For millions of Burmese citizens, what they thought they knew about their Muslim neighbors came from this deliberate disinformation campaign.

On Purim, we recount how the Jews were threatened by the story told about them by one man, Haman. As the king of a diverse empire, why did Achashverosh so readily accept Haman’s narrative about the Jews? How did Haman’s story of the Jews become the policy in Shushan, and how is that process replicated at enormous scale on social media today? We think Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s concept of the “single story” helps us understand how a negative narrative about ethnic groups can spread—with disastrous consequences.

THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY

Below are excerpts from a TED Talk by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, entitled: “The Danger of a Single Story.” Adichie is the author of several novels, and her work has been translated into 30 languages. She has received numerous awards and distinctions, including the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.

You can watch the whole TED Talk by googling [“TED Talk Single Story”](#)

Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story” (excerpt)

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn’t finish my dinner, my mother would say, “Finish your food! Don’t you know? People like Fide’s family have nothing.” So I felt enormous pity for Fide’s family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my “tribal music,” and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.

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She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

QUESTIONS

- What makes telling a “single story” different from simply stereotyping? To clarify the distinction, discuss with your chavruta an example of stereotyping from your life, current events or elsewhere. Now discuss an example of a “single story” (not from the TED talk!). How are they different?
- According to Adichie, power is the ability to tell another person’s story and make it the definitive story of that person. For what groups might you be carrying around a “single story”? How did you learn that story? What power do you have to define the “single stories” of others?

HAMAN'S SINGLE STORY

The Book of Esther, 3:6, 8-9

6) But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; having been told who Mordecai’s people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordecai’s people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

8) Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in Your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them. 9) If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction...”

[Adapted from JPS translation]

מגילת אסתר ג:ו, ח-ט

ו וַיִּבֹז בְּעֵינָיו לְשַׁלַּח יָד בְּמֹרְדֵכַי לְבַדּוֹ כִּי־הִגִּידוּ
לוֹ אֶת־עַם מְרֹדֵכַי וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת־כָּל־
הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מְלָכוֹת אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ עִם מְרֹדֵכַי:
ח וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ, לְמַלְךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ--יִשְׁנוּ עִם־אֶחָד
מִפְּזָר וּמִפֶּרֶד בֵּין הָעַמִּים, בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלָכוֹתָהּ;
וְדַתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל־עַם, וְאֶת־דַּתִּי הַמְּלָךְ אֵינֶם
עוֹשִׂים, וְלְמַלְךְ אֵין־שׁוּהָ, לְהַנִּיחֵם. ט אִם־עַל־
...הַמְּלָךְ טוֹב, יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדֵם

QUESTIONS

- Why does Haman link Mordechai to all the Jews in Persia? How does his personal conflict with Mordechai become an attack on the whole group?
- What is the “single story” that Haman tells about the Jews of Persia? Why does Achashverosh accept that story? Why does his telling of this story have the power that it does?

Babylonia Talmud Megilah 13b

בבלי מגילה יג:ב

Haman continued: **“And their laws are diverse from those of every people”** (Esther 3:8), **as they do not eat from our food, nor do they marry from our women, nor do they marry off their women to us. “Nor do they keep the king’s laws”** (Esther 3:8). **They spend the entire year** in idleness, as they are constantly saying: **Shehi pehi**, an acronym for: It is Shabbat today [Shabbat hayom]; it is Passover today [Pesah hayom]. The verse continues: **“Therefore it does not profit the king to tolerate them,” as they eat and drink and scorn the throne.** And a proof of this is that **even if a fly falls into the cup of one of them, he will throw the fly out and drink the wine it fell into, but if my master the king were to touch the glass of one of them, he would throw it to the ground, and would not drink it**, since it is prohibited to drink wine that was touched by a gentile.

ודתיהם שונות מכל עם דלא אכלי מינן ולא נסבי מינן ולא מנסבי לן ואת דתי המלך אינם עושים דמפקי לכולא שתא בשהי פהי ולמלך אין שוה להניחם דאכלו ושתו ומבזו ליה למלכות ואפילו נופל זבוב בכוסו של אחד מהן זורקו ושותהו ואם אדוני המלך נוגע בכוסו של אחד מהן חובטו בקרקע ואינו שותהו

QUESTIONS

- What does the Talmud think the “single story” is that Haman was telling? How do they extrapolate the story based on their own understanding of Jewish dietary laws?
- How does your reflection on the “single stories” told about Jews change the way you might communicate with others, like many in the developing world, who are subject to a “single story”? How might it change the way you talk about those others?

THE RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO PERPETUATE PREJUDICE

A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar’s Military

[The New York Times](#)

October 15, 2018

NAYPYIDAW, [Burma*]—They posed as fans of pop stars and national heroes as they flooded Facebook with their hatred. One said Islam was a global threat to Buddhism. Another shared a false story about the rape of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man. The Facebook posts were not from everyday internet users. Instead, they were from [Burmese] military personnel who turned the social network into a tool for ethnic cleansing, according to former military officials, researchers and civilian officials in the country.

Members of the [Burmese] military were the prime operatives behind a systematic campaign on Facebook that stretched back half a decade and that targeted the country’s mostly Muslim Rohingya minority group, the people said... Human rights groups blame the anti-Rohingya propaganda for [inciting murders](#), [rapes](#) and the largest forced human migration in recent history.

...
One of the most dangerous [social media] campaigns came in 2017, when the military’s intelligence arm spread rumors on Facebook to both Muslim and Buddhist groups that an attack from the other side was imminent, said two people. Making use of the anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, it spread warnings on Facebook Messenger via widely followed accounts masquerading as news sites and celebrity fan pages that “jihad attacks” would be carried out. To Muslim groups it spread a separate message that nationalist Buddhist monks were organizing anti-Muslim protests.

The purpose of the campaign, which set the country on edge, was to generate widespread feelings of vulnerability and fear that could be salvaged only by the military’s protection, said researchers who followed the tactics.”

**The original article called the country by its official name, Myanmar, but AJWS uses the name Burma, in keeping with how persecuted ethnic minorities refer to their own country.*

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QUESTIONS

- How does the Burmese military use social media to establish a predominant narrative about the Rohingya people?
- What responsibility do you have as a consumer and producer of social media to verify the stories you are sharing? How can you spot unreliable stories as they are shared?
- What are the single stories we hold—not just about the developing world but about our own communities and each other? How does this reflection change your attitudes to all different types of people in our lives—friends and family, colleagues and community members, strangers and neighbors?