

A Jewish Response to Black Lives Matter

On March 21, 1965, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched from Selma to Montgomery, arm in arm, with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other supporters of the civil rights movement. During this historic walk, Heschel said afterwards that he felt he “was praying with [his] feet.” The photograph of this scene is iconic. We’ve all surely seen it.

Rabbi Heschel was not the lone Jewish voice in the fight for civil rights. In fact, American Jews played a significant role in the founding and funding of some of the most important civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, which was also headed by a son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants.¹

In 1964, Jews made up half of the young people who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer project which attempted to register as many African American voters as possible in Mississippi, a state that had historically excluded many blacks from voting.

That same year, 17 leaders of the Reform Movement, including my rabbi and teacher, Richard Levy, were arrested with Dr. King in St. Augustine, Florida as they protested racial segregation in public spaces.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington D.C.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz was another champion of the Civil Rights movement. He saw the plight of African Americans and other minority groups in the context of his own experience under the Nazi regime.

While serving as President of the American Jewish Congress he helped organize the March on Washington on August 28, 1963 and took the podium immediately before Martin Luther King delivered his famous “I have a dream” speech.

I’d like to share part of his moving speech which is not included in most Civics text books:

I speak to you as an American Jew.

As Americans we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which make a mockery of the great American idea.

As Jews...our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral

¹ Kivie Kaplan led the NAACP from 1966-1975

concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity.

It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

Rabbi Prinz's words echo loudly even today, 53 years later.

American Jews were involved in the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960's. We had a strong relationship with the African American community. We helped make history. And this is something we should be proud of. I love teaching about this relationship to my Confirmation class. This is what prophetic Judaism looks like. This is social justice.

And so when I read the much anticipated Black Lives Matter platform in early August, my heart sank.

Let me share with you what was published in the "Invest/Divest" section of the platform:

The US justifies and advances the global war on terror via its alliance with Israel and is complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people...Israel is an apartheid state with over 50 laws on the books that sanction discrimination against the Palestinian people...Israeli soldiers also regularly arrest and detain Palestinians as young as 4 years old without due process. Everyday, Palestinians are forced to walk through military checkpoints along the US-funded apartheid wall.²

The platform's action plans include: divestment campaigns to end US Aid to Israel's military and fighting the "expanding number of Anti-BDS bills being passed in states around the country."

As a lover of Israel, a proud Zionist and a concerned American Jew for our ancient Homeland and the level of vitriolic anti-semitism in the world today, this text filled me with confusion and anger. I felt betrayed.

In fairness, Israel is not blameless. No country is. It's hard to imagine anyone agreeing with every policy Israel has on the books, but to call Israel a country that practices wanton mass extermination of its Palestinian neighbors is just plain wrong. The Palestinian population has actually been growing rapidly over the past 20 years.³

I wonder if the authors were also aware of the following:

² <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/v>

³ <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps> (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics)

Israel is a world leader in international humanitarian and rescue efforts. They were the first to open field hospitals after the 2010 Haiti earthquake. They have traditionally been first responders in every major natural disaster, even in nations that have poor relations with Israel.

Israel is a home for refugees. After the US, it adopts more immigrants every year than nearly any other nation relative to its size. Israel has also treated around 2,500 Syrians in a field hospital on the border as well as at regular hospitals throughout the country.

For almost 20 years, Tel Aviv has hosted one of the largest gay pride parades in the world. Certainly the biggest in all of Asia and the Middle East.

And believe it or not, many Palestinians, other Arabs and non-Jews benefit greatly from Israel's existence.

When I hear about these accomplishments and efforts, it's hard for me to digest texts which portray Israel as a nation that practices genocide as well. For a country that is committed to saving and protecting lives and living according to Jewish values, destroying lives would be antithetical to everything she stands for.

The Jewish people do not in any sense have ownership over the term "genocide." We are well aware of what it means as we have been targeted victims of genocide for a few thousand years. We know what genocide looks like. According to the Ray Wolpov Institute for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Crimes Against Humanity⁴, there have been genocides in many places, such as Rwanda, Sudan, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Zimbabwe, just to name a few. And let us not forget about Syria. What a sad fact of our world. Personally, I just need to look at my maternal family tree and notice dozens of black dots next to names, both known and unknown, each denoting a life snuffed out during the Shoah. That was genocide.

So how did this happen? How could the Black Lives Matter movement insult the Jewish community in such a visceral way? Is there no memory of our fruitful relationship decades ago?

My friends, the civil rights work that we participated in years ago is a source of pride for us, but for the African American community, civil rights are still an unrealized dream. This is the truth. While Heschel's walk with Dr. King in Alabama and Rabbi Prinz's speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial are part of our narrative, they are not part of the Black narrative. These events are not part of their collective memory.

⁴ <https://wce.wvu.edu/nwchgee/genocide>

One of my colleagues even suggested that one reason why the plight of the Palestinians are included in the manifesto is because Palestinians reached out and expressed how the two groups are allies in their struggles. They are both David while the US and Israel are Goliath.

In other words, the Jewish community had not made strong enough relationships with the Black Lives Matter movement. We haven't been in dialogue. This is result of Jews not being in relationship with people of color and sharing our stories. I have not been in relationship. And when there is no relationship, how can you expect the other to understand your story?

As much as I have struggled with the platform, I understand that this is a crucial moment for ourselves and our fellow Americans. This is a moment when we must have a painfully honest conversation about our relationship. We must look in the mirror and reflect on what we ought to be doing to bridge this great chasm between our communities.

One approach might be to refute their claims and shut down any possibility of conversation until they meet us where we are. We can walk away, nurse our wounds and hope they'll reach out to ask for our forgiveness.

We can remain angry with the movement and profess that "All Lives Matter." But we know this not to be true. All lives are not at risk right now. We need to understand that this is our collective fight, not their fight alone So we must listen. We need to understand the trauma and prejudicious our brothers and sisters have endured since the founding of this great country.

While slavery may have officially ended with Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, people of color suffer daily "in America under systemic racism that takes the form of implicit bias, legislative inequity, racially disparate sentencing and arrest rates, police brutality, and more."⁵ It seems that anytime we turn on the news there is some story of violence being directed at unarmed black people.

The Torah demands that we "not stand idly by when [our] neighbor's blood is shed." The Torah does not give us an out as though we can stand idly by if we dislike our neighbor, or when we disagree with their views. Or when they offend us. Or if they aren't our geographic neighbor. Instead, we need to get in the ring just as our heroes did over 50 years ago because we know what its like to be persecuted for who we are. We know what its like to be at the receiving end of prejudice.

In his seminal book on race in America, and one of the most moving books I have ever read, Ta-Nehisi Coates gives the following piece of advice to his son in "Between the

⁵ Rabbi Menachem Creditor: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-wounded-friend-a-rabbinic-response-to-the-new-black_us_57a40ed8e4b0c94bd3c91ee4

World and Me.” He writes: “I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.”⁶

How can we heed this advice? How can we be conscious citizens who do not stand idly by?

The first thing we ought to do and perhaps the most important is to simply listen. To pay attention. And God can be a role model for us in this respect.

In Genesis 21, after Hagar is banished into the wilderness with her son Ishmael, they run out of water, and not wanting to see her infant son die, she places him under the shade of a tree. Hagar walks away wailing and says “Let me not look upon the death of this child.” God hears her anguish and responds.

In our *machzor*, we say, *shema kolaynu*, “God, hear our voices.” If we expect God to listen to us at our most vulnerable moments, then we should listen to others who are crying out.

And let us also consider the sound of the shofar. The Mishnah teaches⁷ that if the shofar is sounded in a pit or a cistern, and someone hears the sound of the shofar, than that person has fulfilled the mitzvah of listening to the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. But if one hears only the sound of the echo, then he has not fulfilled the mitzvah. The Gemara comments that if the listener is in the pit when the shofar is sounded, then surely the listener has heard the sound itself, and has fulfilled the obligation. But if the listener is standing only on the edge of the pit, then the listener has only heard the echo, and has not fulfilled the obligation.⁸

In other words, we must be present with people and only then will we actually hear their voices and their pain. We have to be in the pit with them and not ignore the Black experience or even pretend to understand what they are going through. This also applies to so many other atrocities in the world. The plight of African Americans is surely not the only cause to concern ourselves with, but it is nevertheless relevant, especially when 11% of the Reform movement are people of color.

It is my hope that the Jewish community will re-commit to advocating for racial justice and not fall into the trap of choosing between fighting systemic racism in American or denouncing the platform’s hurtful words. These are not mutually exclusive. At the same

⁶ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

⁷ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:7

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 27b

time, people need to hear us say that “We reject wholeheartedly the notion that effective anti-racism work can only be done by denouncing and excoriating Israel.”⁹

We can not walk away.

As you may have noticed, Bellingham is not all that diverse. Nearly 85% of the population are caucasian and 1.3% are African American. The opportunities to listen and be in proximity are scarce. So let’s talk about race in our own community. In Living Room Learning sessions and with our own families. In book groups and perhaps in more formal settings too.

What else can we do?

How about calling out anti-Semitic rhetoric, especially when it originates in movements that are fighting for freedom and equality. We can not remain silent when Jews are attacked.

We must continue to defend Israel’s right to exist even when we disagree with some of her policies. Dr. King once said, “we must stand with all our might to protect her right to exist...Israel is one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy.”¹⁰

Anti-semitism, like racism, should have no place in our society. And our neighbors should understand how the Black Lives Matter platform demonizes our Homeland and our People.

My friends, we can not retreat no matter how justifiable our anger is at this moment. Retreating will only create a wider chasm. And as First Lady Michelle Obama said so beautifully, “When they go low, we go high.” It would be a serious moral failure to get stuck in a cycle of action/reaction.

Today we find ourselves on the holiest of the year. Let us pay attention to what Yom Kippur is all about: reflecting, struggling, apologizing, forgiving, and committing to be conscious citizens of the world.

⁹ Rabbi Jonah Pesner: <http://www.rac.org/reform-movement-leaders-reaffirm-commitment-racial-justice-condemn-movement-black-lives-platform>

¹⁰ Dr. King speaking at the annual convention of the Rabbinical Assembly in 1968

Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimena – “We are not expected to complete the work, but neither are we free to avoid it.”¹¹

May we get in the pit, listen, and grow deep.

¹¹ Rabbi Tarfon, Pirkei Avot 2:21