

# JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

## ON RACIAL JUSTICE

### Framing

*Despite vast steps towards racial equality since the Civil Rights Movement, racism is still pervasive today. Racism, the systematic discrimination of people based on skin color, permeates the everyday lives of People of Color on interpersonal, political, institutional, and cultural levels. We are a part of a multiethnic and multiracial Jewish community— and yet the normative view of a Jew in the U.S., both inside and outside the Jewish community, is a white, Ashkenazi Jew from Eastern Europe.*

*Jewish values call us to wrestle with how our Jewish identity connects to race, to white cultural norms and privileges, and to the need to address racial inequities both within and outside our Jewish community. Let's move towards these conversations about racial justice with courage.*

### APPETIZER

We recommend that you lay out your community agreements before diving into these questions.

This MLK weekend, let's start with the personal. **Spend five minutes on your own considering the following questions. When you are ready, find a partner to share your answers to one or two of the questions.**<sup>1</sup>

- What are some of your earliest memories of race?
- During your childhood, what messages did you get about race and racism from your family, community, and society in general? What messages did you receive about your racial identity in particular?
- If you identify as Jewish, what messages have you received within the Jewish community about race and racism?
- Who are the people who have most influenced your thinking about race and racial justice? Who has helped to shape your own racial identity?

### ENTREE

*Delve into the following texts exploring the relationship between Judaism, race, and racial justice. These different authors explore how and when some Jews gained access to whiteness<sup>2</sup> and what it means for the Jews that were not allowed entry.*

### Instructions

Find a *chevruta* (a partner) and discuss the following four texts. You can spend all of your time delving deep into just one text or you can discuss all four texts. The authors examine how Jewish identity and anti-semitism intersect with other identities and forms of identities. The texts call us to examine the boundaries of Jewish institutions and Jewish spaces and they ask how the American Jewish community can and should engage in racial justice movements. When you are ready, come back together and share any takeaways as a larger group.

*Chevruta* is an Aramaic<sup>3</sup> word that literally means "friendship" or "companionship." It is the traditional rabbinic approach to Talmudic study in which a pair of students analyze, discuss, and debate a shared text. Unlike a teacher-student relationship, partner learning puts each student in the position of analyzing the text, organizing their thoughts into logical arguments, explaining their reasoning to their partner, hearing out their partner's reasoning, and questioning and sharpening each other's ideas, often arriving at entirely new insights into the meaning of the text.

<sup>1</sup> | Questions adapted by Suzanne Feinspan from resource created by [Avodah](#)

<sup>2</sup> | While "white" is a category of race that has been created and accepted by a society to refer to white-skinned people, "whiteness" is a social construction, behavior, ideology and system that embraces white culture, experiences, and appearances as the norm and relegates all else as "the other" through explicit and implicit violence. In order to maintain white culture, experiences, and appearance as superior to any other in power and status, "whiteness" expands and contracts to give different communities and identities access to privileges, rights, opportunity, and power in society. Whiteness is often invisible for those within it, and alienating for those outside of it.

<sup>3</sup> | Aramaic is a Northwest Semitic is closely related to Hebrew. It served as an important regional language throughout the Middle East from the 10th century BCE to the 7th century CE, and many Jewish texts from that period are written in it.

## Guiding Questions

- Which texts resonate with your experiences? Which ones surprise or challenge you?
- How do these texts illuminate ways in which racism operates within the Jewish community?
- Based on these different texts, why and how should the Jewish community engage in racial justice work?
  - What are some concrete next steps for your community?
- Do the following texts make a connection between anti-semitism and racism? If so, how do those oppressions interact and intersect?
- Who do you think the audience is for each text? What is the responsibility conferred upon the reader?



Image source: jewschool.com

### “Talking Honestly About Jews and Racism,” Erika Davis<sup>4</sup>

*Erika Davis is a Jew of Color, educator, and writer who writes about the intersection of race, sexual orientation, and religion. She is a former board member of the Jewish Multiracial Network and currently sits on the board of Keshet.*

Answer these questions honestly: If I walk into your shul for Friday night service would you sit next to me or would you allow one person to occupy an entire pew? If I walked into your shul right about the time you were picking up your child would you presume I was a nanny? If you sat across from me on the subway and noticed the Magen David around my neck, would you smile at me? Or wonder why I was wearing it? If I were shopping for challah in your shop on Friday afternoon, would you wish me a good Shabbos?

I pose these questions not just because they are my experiences, but to encourage us to take a look inward and remember our history as Jews. I’m sure many of us have heard an anti-Semitic remark that shook us to the core, but for the most part secular Jews can walk around not attracting much attention. But not long ago to be a Jew was a bad thing, something to be loathed, something to try to hide.

Through the promise of America, many Jews were able to start anew simply by changing their last name. In the US Jews became “white,” and with that whiteness came privilege. But as Jews don’t we also have the responsibility to remember what life was like before this era of unprecedented privilege? We’re taught to never forget about our experience as outsiders, and yet, we have.

4 | Davis, Erika. “Talking Honestly About Jews and Racism”. The Forward. 13 June 2012



*“Mixed Multitudes: Nobody’s Free ‘til Everybody’s Free: A Racial Justice Haggadah for Pesach,”* **Leo Ferguson**<sup>5</sup>

Leo Ferguson is a Jew of color and the Leadership Development and Communications Organizer at Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ).

Jews of color cannot choose to ignore the experiences of people of color everywhere, anymore than we would ignore our Jewishness. We must fully inhabit both communities and we need all Jews to stand with us, forcefully and actively opposing racism and police violence.

But in order to do so, we must pare our past trauma from our present truth: our history of oppression leaves many of us hyper-vigilant and overly preoccupied with safety. As Jews we share a history that is overburdened with tales of violent oppression. Though different Jewish communities have varying experiences, none of us have escaped painful legacies of persecution, including genocide. This past is real, and part of why we gather today is to remember it. But the past is past. However seductive harsh policing, surveillance and incarceration may be in the short term, it will never serve us in the end. Not when those tactics brutalize other communities, humiliating and incarcerating our neighbors and perpetuate a status quo that leaves low-income communities of color on the other side of a sea of fear — still trapped; still stranded. The only real way out of the Mitzrayim of our fears is solidarity. Only by forging deep connections and sharing struggle with other communities will we creating the lasting allies who will walk with us into the promised land of our collective liberation. That is true Jewish freedom — true and lasting safety.

*“For Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, Whiteness Was a Fragile Identity Long Before Trump,”* **Sigal Samuel**<sup>6</sup>

Sigal Samuel is the Religion Editor at The Atlantic and the author of *The Mystics of Mile End*. This excerpt comes from a *Forward* op-ed published on December 6, 2016 in response to questions raised by Trump’s election in white Jewish communities.

As a Mizrahi Jew — my ancestors come from India, Iraq and Morocco — I inhabit [an] ambiguous middle space. For a long time, it’s been a lonely place to be, since Ashkenazi is Judaism’s default setting in America. But here’s how I think about what’s happening now: Ashkenazi Jews are increasingly getting pushed into the middle space with me....

Why not relish the discomfort of inhabiting this ambiguous middle space? Discomfort can be productive. Let it reveal to you what it’s revealed to Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews for decades: that your dream of fitting snugly into a certain racial category was doomed from the start, because the category of “whiteness” itself is bogus, a social construct with ever-shifting borders — just look at how it fails to consistently contain or exclude you.

Now, notice how recognizing the fragility of your white identity encourages you to ask some tricky questions. Questions like, “If I’m never going to be white enough for the ‘alt-right’ — if, from their perspective, I’ve been inhabiting the middle part of the spectrum all along — then should I really be allying myself with the likes of Steve Bannon? Shouldn’t I instead ally myself with Jews of color — and with people of color in general, and with Muslims and immigrants and all the other primary targets under Trump?”

5 | Ferguson, Leo. [“Mixed Multitudes: Nobody’s Free ‘til Everybody’s Free: A Racial Justice Haggadah for Passover”](#). *Jews For Racial and Economic Justice*. April 2016

6 | Samuel, Sigal. [“For Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, Witness Was a Fragile Identity Long Before Trump.”](#) *The Forward* 6 December 2016





“ERIC GARNER, C’EST TOI,” MaNishtana<sup>7</sup>

MaNishtana is a writer, playwright, speaker, novelist, and rabbi, whose work takes prejudice, bias, and ignorance head on with a humorous and often irreverent voice that shatters the misconceptions of Orthodox Judaism, American Jewish racial identity, and African-American religious identity, with gut-punching insights and gut-busting sarcasm. And just a touch of bourbon. And then another touch after that.

But maybe you’re one of those Jews who believes one has to first look out for their own. You might not care about racial profiling. It’s the only way to stop “those people,” you say. You might not care about stop-and-frisk. It’s for their own good, you say. If you’re not guilty, then you should have nothing to hide, you nod. You think racial profiling and stop-and-frisk doesn’t happen to Jews, so it’s not a Jewish problem to think about. It only happens to “those people.”

You are wrong.

Because here’s the thing: Some of your people are “those people.” Some of “those people” are your people. There are Jews, here, in these United States, this bastion of freedom for Jews escaping pogroms and Inquisitions and Holocausts, who cannot walk down the street without a fear for their lives from the very authorities who are supposed to protect them. There are Jews who will always be approached by police as a suspect, never as a citizen. Who will always be viewed as just another criminal savage who hasn’t been put away yet. A perp who doesn’t have a mugshot yet. And there aren’t enough streimels or black hats or tallitot in the world to protect them.

Permission by Rabbi Mike Rothbaum



DESSERT

Using the conversation with your chevruta as a guide, answer the following prompts for yourself. In what ways are you able to transform the answer to these prompts into tangible conversation and action in your life and in your Jewish community?

I heard \_\_\_\_\_

I saw \_\_\_\_\_

I felt \_\_\_\_\_

I need \_\_\_\_\_

I gave \_\_\_\_\_

**One tangible way I will engage in conversations about race within my community**

\_\_\_\_\_