

Dear Friends,

I share the following with the hopes that it may lead us in necessary conversations of truth. I would be most appreciative to know how the conversations unfold. God bless you and keep you safe.

I am a Jew. I was born into the oppression of slavery. I endured the hardships of the wilderness. I witnessed my homeland overrun and overturned; the murder and rape of my countrymen, first by the Babylonians, then the Greeks, and then the Romans. I survived the destruction of my culture as I was forced into exile, again a slave.

I am a Jew. I have been shunned, misaligned, segregated, and denied the rights afforded citizens of the majority. I have suffered the unequal application of justice and, more often, the outright denial of justice. I have been burned, slaughtered, drowned, shackled and chased out of town and country.

I am a Jew. I have resolutely risen to overcome the darkness of my persecution, glimpsing moments of sunlight, only to have the clouds of hate and suspicion come rolling back in. I have met the blood libels, stood accused of calumnies, been scapegoated for every ill a society may experience. I have been determined to be less than human.

I am a Jew. I have faced the trials of inquisition. I have fallen in pogroms, I have been raided by Cossacks, I have been forced off the sidewalk so others might pass by. I have been denied the right to live where I wanted, to attend school where I wanted, to enter a profession of my choosing. I have had to sit on separate benches and drink from different fountains. I have been prohibited from dining establishments and places to socialize or rest for the night. I have been relegated to economic subordination.

I am a Jew. I have brought great science and insight, culture and medicine to my society. I had finally seen the walls of ghettos fall and the conditioned hand of citizenship offered. And then I witnessed Auschwitz and Dachau. My family were among one third of my people as they were gunned into pits, hung from gallows, burned alive in buildings secured shut, gassed and cremated in chambers specifically created to more efficiently be done with me.

I am a Jew. I have lived a long time.

I am a Jew. And I have survived my past. I came to these shores where the streets were paved with gold. A lady, holding a torch of freedom and hope greeted my arrival. Again, there were movements and prejudices that took aim at my solace, my personhood, my God given right to live as any free man would want to live. But here, in America, I prevailed. Here, I made it. Here I became an American. Here, I became white.

I am an American Jew. I fought to win my nascent country's liberty. I joined, organized, and led for the rights of labor. I gave my life to ride for freedom in the south and to register voters. I

marched for civil rights and equal rights and spent my time in jail. I helped form the NAACP, the ACLU, the ADL. I gave my home as a base point for the March on Washington. I have stood in the forefront to win rights for migrant laborers, force protections for our earth, bring an end to unjust wars, beat down poverty and hunger, and bring understanding between faiths. I was among the first to open my heart and mind to LGBTQ and have kept them open ever since.

But as I grew to embrace my Americanism, I grew to treasure my whiteness – my shield – my ticket. I changed my name to ensure that unless I let on, no one would know I was different. Jewishness would continue as it was convenient or, if it fit the moment. I am loyal. I am patriotic. I am proud. Country first.

Yet embracing Americanism, embracing whiteness, means embracing all that comes with it. As a white American, I raised no dissent against Manifest Destiny. I treated peoples who lived in this land, long before I, as savages; less than human. I slaughtered indigenous peoples, confiscated their lands, wore boots fashioned out of leather made from their flesh. I marched communities of native peoples to death and ghettoized those who survived on reservations. I kept men and women and children as slaves. When slavery was outlawed, I supported Jim Crow. Maids, chauffeurs, and cooks only entered through the back door.

I supported isolationism. I feared the “Yellow Peril.” I interned Japanese citizens in concentration camps. Italian citizens too. I fought against desegregation and moved when my neighborhood became too “colorful.” I enrolled my children in private “Jewish” day schools and as I assimilated in most things, I developed a taste for the good life. The good life brought entitlement and privilege. Entitlement and privilege fed my indifference. What was out of sight was out of mind. I built camps in which refugees, a vague memory, could be caged like animals, nowhere to lie down or to sit; children torn from parents, neither knowing if the other was alive or dead. I called for a wall. I allowed my government’s leadership to institutionalize, maintain, and enforce the status quo. I bought into the calumnies, the stereotypes, and the scapegoating of others.

I have lived a long time.

I am a Jew. But I am also an American, and I am white. Where one ends and the other begins, if at all, is of great moment and that moment requires a deliberate searching of the soul. I am part of this society. I am therefore part of the problems that threaten to unravel it or promise to move it forward. But if I claim any right to call myself a Jew, I certainly cannot allow my brother to bleed – knowing what it is to bleed. If I lay claim to be an American, I must own our collective triumphs as well as our failures. If I am white, then I must use the privilege this society has bestowed upon me, through no fault or feat of my own, to be more than white – more than American – more than Jewish. I must use it to be human.

Faithfully, Rabbi David Castiglione