

A Year of Active Listening

The Jewish Center, 2020/2021 - 5781

“The People of Israel do not participate in backlash or frontlash or sidelash. The descendants of Abraham do not lash -- at all! Rather, they attempt to respond constructively and creatively and sympathetically.”

- Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, “Putting a Bad Conscience to Good Use,” *The Jewish Center*, October 29, 1966.

Our country, our city, our neighborhood and our immediate community have suffered dramatically in the last few months. A global pandemic, tumultuous political climate, and racial injustice pervade our collective consciousness.

לא עליך המלאכה לגמר ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה.

We cannot fix everything, but neither are we powerless.

In addition to the steps we have taken to respond to this public health crisis and political turmoil, **we must ask ourselves:**

- Are we doing enough to address the racial injustices that have been exposed in stark relief this past month?
- Can we “attempt to respond constructively and creatively and sympathetically”?
- What might such a response look like today?

Racism runs against the grain of one of Judaism’s fundamental assumptions; every human is created *בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים*, in the image of the Divine. As the Talmud makes clear, this means that every human being is endowed with infinite value, that every person is unique, and that no person can claim intrinsic superiority (Sanhedrin 4:5). The Torah goes out of its way to remind us that of all peoples, we Jews, should stand against oppression.

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאִתָּם יִדְעֶתֶם אֶת־נֶפֶשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

“Do not oppress a stranger for you know what it feels like to be a stranger” (Exodus 23:9).

Our history – from Biblical to contemporary times – endows us with a unique responsibility to both speak out against racism and to participate in creating a more just society.

In sermons delivered at The Jewish Center, Rabbi Norman Lamm concretely applied this timeless Jewish value as a remedy for the ugly racism facing America in the 1960s. He spoke against the evils of racism (*Insights in Evil*, 1964), equated economic injustice with idolatry (*The Religious Foundation of Business*, 1963), and decried complacency towards and moral rationalizations of evil (*Insights into Evil*, 1964). He contrasted Adam’s avoidance of responsibility with Abraham’s introspection after each was called to account by God. Rabbi Lamm taught from our pulpit,

It took 20 generations [from Adam to Abraham] for mankind to learn what to do with a bad conscience. In our own time, with our accelerated pace of living, we cannot afford the luxury of waiting quite that long before learning – in our lives, as Jews, as Americans, as human beings – the difference between Adam and Abraham in what to do with a bad conscience. (*Putting a Bad Conscience to Good Use*, 1966)

Once again, we, the Children of Abraham, are called to account.

How will we respond?

The members of our *shul* maintain a high level of mutual respect and cordiality in our relations with members of the Black community. However, it not sufficient for us to simply “not be racist.” **We must be actively anti-racist.**

This “Year of Active Listening” is not primarily about us, but about our neighbors. Therefore, the most important first step for us, The Jewish Center community, is to **listen**.

- *We can listen*, not for the purpose of responding, but rather for the purpose of learning and internalizing what we learn.
- *We can wonder* with an open mind: How has the history of race relations in America brought us to this moment? How are the lives of People of Color impacted by that history to this day? How is racism manifest in legal, economic, educational, and societal realms?
- *We can study* with scholars, leaders, and individuals.
- *We can try to understand* the lived experiences of our neighbors and fellow citizens right here in our own and our neighboring zip codes.
- *We can approach* this conversation from a place of kindness, generosity, and empathy.

Ultimately, we hope to take communal action in support of anti-racism. But first, we must understand the depth of the issue, develop relationships with partners who share our mission, and hear what is being asked of us... so we can respond appropriately.

Goals of “A Year of Active Listening”

1. To provide our congregation with opportunities and resources to educate ourselves- with open minds and hearts- on issues of racism as they pertain to, and impact on, our understanding of history, the lived experience of our neighbors, and our Jewish identity.
2. To build individual, communal, and organizational relationships with People of Color.
3. To inspire our congregation to take meaningful, helpful communal action that emerges consciously from this learning experience.

The Role of the Committee

The committee, together with Rabbi Levine and Community Educator Ora Weinbach, will work to determine the best methodologies to accomplish the program goals.

This includes, but need not be limited to:

- Planning the educational program including topics, format, invited speakers, readings or film options, etc.
- Brainstorming ways to engage the greatest number of community members and recruiting for the events.
- Researching communities or groups with whom we might work.
- Gathering participant feedback at the conclusion of formal programming.
- Translating our learning into concrete, communal actions.