

In all my life no one has ever said to me “Funny you don’t look Jewish!” And I bet that’s true for many, if not most of us. But it’s not true for all of us.

## **PLAY HEBREW MAMITA VIDEO**

It’s not true for Mizrachi Jews or for Jews from Sephardic backgrounds, and it’s not true for Jews of colour and Asian Jews and Jews with Indigenous backgrounds.

And we say...and we say...and we say...nothing.

I’ll bet, in all their lives, no one has ever said to a Jew of Colour: “funny, you don’t look Black!”

How many times have you heard someone say that we should all be “colourblind”?” That’s meant to convey a distaste for attitudes common in an earlier era. But colourblindness as an ideology is used to deny the kind of covert and obscure racism that sits alongside explicit racism. The refusal to take public note of race actually allows people to ignore the quiet, creeping manifestations of persistent discrimination that people of colour live with daily.

I'm surprised at the claim of colour blindness myself because I personally know that there is no such thing as gender blindness, for example. We don't all just treat each other as if we didn't notice gender, as if we didn't joke about it or rail against it or have parties to reveal it. In 2019 at an interview at Georgetown University, Ruth Bader Ginsburg of blessed memory remarked that while most of the explicit gender-based classifications and barriers are gone today in legal terms, "what remains is unconscious bias." So while we may claim we are gender blind there is still so much unconscious bias that unless the person leading the orchestra, driving the bus, sitting on the Supreme Court, caring for your children or leading your congregation is behind a curtain, if they present as female the world will see them as female no matter how blind it claims it is. In all my life not one of my male rabbinic colleagues has ever been called a "man Rabbi" or been asked for the millionth time "hey I know they call the husband of a Rabbi lucky but what do they call the wife of a Rabbi?"

Rav, and Rabbi Ḥanina, and Rabbi Yoḥanan, and Rav Ḥaviva taught in the Talmud, Shabbat 54b: "Anyone who had the capability to effectively protest the sinful conduct of the members of their household and did not protest, they are held responsible for the sins of the members of their household and

punished. If they could protest the sinful conduct of the people of their town, and fail to do so, they are held responsible for the sins of the people of the town. And if they are in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the whole world, and fails to do so, they are held responsible for the sins of the whole world.”

I do not want it said that on my watch we said...nothing.

I know we would all say “but I’m not racist... What we are talking about when we say racism is not our individual feelings about this person of colour or that one, it is about *power* within society—wielded collectively by those who have it against those who don’t.

This isn’t only a Jewish problem. The conversation around racism is a difficult one for all white people because it brings up what has been coined by author Robin DiAngelo as “white fragility”— feelings of guilt, defensiveness, and the phenomenon by which white people become angry ...or hostile when confronted with the idea that they are complicit in systemic racism.

This is even more complicated for Jews who have an extra layer of our own history of both being

oppressed, plus the glorious memories of the days when we worked hand in hand with civil rights champions.

Yom Kippur morning, holiest day of the year, day on which we are called to beat our breasts and say Ashamnu—we have sinned—is exactly the day to protest the sinful conduct of myself and my people. It is the day we read the scapegoat ritual and declare—no more scapegoats! It is the day we reenact the High priest entering the holy of holies, first confessing for himself and then for his family and then for the whole House of Israel. Today I too confess for myself, for my family and for the whole house of Israel the sin of racism. But more than that—I confess to the sin of Jewish resistance to anti-racist work.

I want to share with you today 4 different ways our fragility around this conversation is making it very hard to lead the Jewish community into real heartfelt anti-racist work.

First, the notion of equivalency: hey we are oppressed too! Anti-semitism! The Holocaust! But no matter how much we bring up all those real and dangerous examples, no one's oppression outweighs anyone else's. It is not a contest. "But-what-about-us" isms do not foster true partnerships.

If anything we Jews as the inheritors of the DNA of an oppressed people, should be wary of the pride of “we did it already” and be leading the way out of the comparison box and into real dialogue.

Second, resting on past laurels. We marched on Selma! We funded the NAACP! Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with Martin Luther King and said “My feet were praying!” It’s a past to be proud of, but it doesn’t absolve us of complacency in the present. As Robin DiAngelo wrote in her book *White Fragility*: “White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice.”

Third, the argument that “we Jews are, after all, not really white.” That statement is only true for Jews of colour. The rest of us can claim that we may not have all the privileges of white majority Christians but to the rest of the world, we are white. Our “internal identity” may be different, we may identify as Portuguese or Italian or Jewish we “pass” as white, we still have a white experience externally, in the world. That racism privileges whites does not

mean that individual white people—and in this case especially Jews— do not struggle or face barriers. But while we may have faced and still face the barriers of anti-Semitism, we *do not* face the barriers of racism.

And last is the challenge—that sometimes feels like an ultimatum— that Jews should not or cannot support BLM because “it is anti-Israel.” Let’s look at that for a moment please. Black Lives Matter is a human and civil rights movement working to end systemic racism against Black people. Of course all lives matter, that’s obvious. But what isn’t obvious is that *black lives matter*. Originating as a hashtag in 2013 after the killing of Trayvon Martin, the movement is composed of entities at the local, national, and international levels. The Black Lives Matter movement is purposefully decentralized. No one group speaks for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Different groups within this overall umbrella take different positions on everything from police reform to reparations.

Four years ago, within that BLM umbrella, the group called the Movement for Black Lives put out a platform that, among a long list of detailed policy recommendations, accused Israel of genocide. This summer, 4 years later, the 10-page summary of their

2020 platform contained no mention of Israel, Zionism, Palestine or BDS.

In August a Jewish statement in support of Black Lives Matter appeared in a full-page New York Times ad, signed by more than 600 national and local Jewish groups and synagogues, including a major umbrella body and three of the four major Jewish religious movements: Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. Yes, some Orthodox and right-wing Jewish organizations continue to oppose the umbrella Black Lives Matter because of the now defunct 2016 platform of the smaller group Movement for Black Lives. Rabbi Sandra Lawson, a Black Jewish leader and Chaplain for Jewish life at Elon University in North Carolina wrote, “For me as a Jew of color, whatever’s in that statement doesn’t matter, because I’m still going to chant ‘Black Lives Matter.’”

And Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism wrote, “Our disagreement with the positions of specific organizations, such as the Movement for Black Lives platform, in no way diminishes our full commitment to the fundamental principle that Black Lives Matter and to doing the work to end systemic racism and white supremacy.”

That is why I hang in my window this beautiful poster of the text “Black Lives Matter” cut into a tallit. I hang it as a Jew and I want my neighbours to know that I support the notion that black lives matter as a Jew. The artist writes about the experience of cutting these words into a Jewish ritual object: “Perhaps the meaning to understand from this is that racism — and the fact that “Black Lives Matter!” ever even had to be stated, insisted upon, shouted to combat the lies we see enacted by much of our society — cuts into my Jewish experience, and my life, and demands a Jewish response.”

If you are interested in getting one of these posters for your own home or office or mikdash m’at, the sacred space you have created in your home, please email me at [rabbi@cityshul.com](mailto:rabbi@cityshul.com) and I will be to organize a group order to come to Toronto from the artist in the States.

Friends: The opposite of a racist is not, “not a racist”. To be the opposite of racist is to be anti-racist. So what do we do from here? How do we manifest the words chanted in this morning’s haftarah: No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness... To break off every yoke.”

First, as Jay Michaelson wrote in the Forward: “...we must, communally, recognize that this is a real crisis and make it a subject of dinner conversations,

rabbinic sermons and communal action. Let's be sure we do that at City Shul.

Second, we must commit to reading, researching, and understanding what racism is and what causes it. Let's find the right people to teach us at City Shul and to offer that kind of learning.

Third, as Ibram Kendi wrote in his book "How To Be an Anti-Racist": "Become aware of subtle racist ideas you might be supporting. We live in a society created by racist policies and racist ideas. All of us internalize these ideas to some extent, and a large part of becoming antiracist is reflecting on our beliefs and recognizing what racist ideas we hold." Let's start talking about this at City Shul.

And fourth, no one is born racist or antiracist; these result from the choices we make. Being antiracist results from a conscious decision to make frequent, consistent, equitable choices daily including identifying racial inequities and disparities and championing antiracist ideas and policies. One cannot strive to be antiracist without action, and Kendi reminds us that one way to act is by supporting organizations in our community that are fighting policies which create racial disparities. We at City Shul will search out positive organizations doing this to support and learn from.

This is not an easy task. As Chris Harrison wrote in his URJ blog: “antiracism must be as integral to and synonymous with our Jewish communities as reciting the Sh’ma.” And as I said in my introduction to the stellar programme City Shul was instrumental in organizing after the death of George Floyd, A Night of Deep Listening: “...truth telling...is not always pretty, easy, simple or painless...”

Together, this year may we be able to say that we found our Jewish voice; we were not paralyzed, we did not say (3x)... nothing.

Gmar Chatimah Tova.