

I don't think I could've looked at myself in the mirror if we had come through the holiday season and I had not delivered a sermon on the matter of race. This year has been full of unbelievable headlines but, the headlines will come and go. Coronavirus will be dealt with, the election will have its impact on our immediate future and the Supreme Court confirmations will have meaning for the next 40 years. But the issue of race has been the ugliest part of our nation's history for 400 years and this moment provides us the opportunity to examine it in a way that we may never have been ready to in the past.

I am not aware of anyone in my life who has a white hood buried in the back of their closet or who marches with flaming tiki torches. But, I also will not say that "I am not a racist." The reason I avoid that language is thanks to the learning and the listening I have been doing for the last couple of years in general but the last couple of months in particular. I know that Rosa Parks demonstration of courage was not random and neither is the groundswell of reaction we have seen to the recent violence against black Americans. We are ready for change and it feels like a privilege (as well as a burden) to be alive and concerned at this time.

The country has been discussing Ibram X. Kendi's book, "[How to be an Antiracist](#)" with great interest of late. It is thanks to him that I know better than to say, "I am not a racist." Kendi argues that "not racist" is a term that "signifies neutrality...but there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not racist.' It is 'antiracist.' ... One either endorses the idea of a racial

hierarchy as a racist or racial equality as an antiracist."¹ I know this is a little hard to hear but it reminds me of both the truism, "You are either a part of the problem or a part of the solution." As well as Elie Wiesel's reminder that, "the opposite of love is indifference." Based on a number of sources² I have compiled a list of steps that I myself need to take and perhaps they will speak to you, as well.

First of all, language matters. Political correctness can obviously be extended to a place in which we paralyze our ability to live, interact and certainly speak. But it is also the mechanism through which we encourage ourselves forward. Just like a *brachah* raises your awareness before specific actions - every time I'm inclined to tell my kids to sit down Indian style, I'm reminded that it is insensitive – and that I can be inadvertently insensitive. Every time I hear someone describe how they were cheated by saying they feel gyped, I am reminded how that would make a member of the Roma community feel and, even if I have never met a gypsy, I recall that I can be unintentionally hurtful. As a Jewish community, we should understand this because of the countless slurs used against and around us. We must avoid falling into the central double standard of ethnic racism: trashing the racist ideas about one's own group but unwittingly consuming the racist ideas about other ethnic groups. Removing expressions and words from our lexicon is a way of raising awareness. Instead of saying, "I am not racist" try instead, "I try not to be racist."

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/15/751070344/theres-no-such-thing-as-not-racist-in-ibram-x-kendis-how-to-be-an-aniracist>

² Stringer, Daniel, PhD. "I'm not a racist" is always the wrong answer. 5/31/2020. <https://blog.usejournal.com/im-not-a-racist-is-always-the-wrong-answer-b7f92eb76a1d>

With the best of intentions, I have probably said things like, “I don’t see color.” Leah Hylo explains in her Haaretz op-ed that, “to tell a Black man or woman that you don’t see their color is akin to saying that you don’t see the oppression that he or she experiences, that you don’t see all our life experiences as a consequence of institutionalized racism. It’s like saying “I don’t see you.” And also:” she continues, “It’s actually saying I don’t see myself as a white man or woman, with all the privileges that entails. White people single out others but don’t want to be singled out themselves, since that obliges them to confront and take responsibility for their power in society.”³

So the second step is to expand our understanding. Many of us have black friends and it might feel like we can just engage them as partners in our own growth but, remember, they’ve been on the receiving end of a raw deal for an awfully long time (far longer than the span of their lives) and they might not be quite ready or feel safe enough (even if you’re a really good friend) to launch into that sort of conversation. I know that I inadvertently caused sting when reaching out to my friends of color during recent riots to express my love and to ask if there’s anything I can do. There is the risk of transforming ourselves into, “Emotional Tourists.” This would describe someone who is not a member of the oppressed group but really wants to try connecting to the locals to get an authentic flavor of their experience.

Those of us who are Jews, have to be really careful here. Like someone telling a cancer patient, “I know just how you feel, my dad had cancer,” we can claim emotional, historical and theological affinity with the oppressed of today’s

³ Hylo, Leah. [The Racist Tradition of Blackface Is Alive and Well in Israel](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-the-racist-tradition-of-blackface-is-alive-and-well-in-israel-1.9154897). 9/14/2020. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-the-racist-tradition-of-blackface-is-alive-and-well-in-israel-1.9154897>

America through our own ethnic and religious battles. And anti-Semitism is, most certainly, a heavy burden to bear and our ancestors understood what institutional racism felt like. But, most of us have skin tone that allows us to pass as the privileged class. While we may have been called a horrific name or felt the stinging pain of cruel jokes or comments, we do not know the feeling of fear at having the police called on us. We do not know the feeling of having other customers slip sideways glances at us when we walk into an environment is mostly white. We learn from our tradition not to ask a mourner how they're doing at a house of shiva but to let them drive the interaction where they need it to go. So, be thoughtful about your learning. It may help to begin by getting your information from books, documentaries or from public addresses and participating in an organized community conversation in which others are facilitating the topic and *then* talking to the people around you – you'll be better prepared to be a partner in the process.

My third piece of advice is to pause. Once you have developed a list of behaviors and statements that you now understand the minority group defines as racist – pause your judgment and simply ask if you may have done or said things like that in your past. This is an honest *cheshbon hanefesh* and before we deal with anyone or anything external, the first step is to look inward and to be honest with ourselves. We're good people with good intentions who can still make mistakes. Kendi explains that, "like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination."⁴ Try to live like a person who doesn't want to be racist – Like

⁴ Taylor, Ericka. [Ibram X. Kendi Says No One Is 'Not Racist.' So What Should We Do?](https://www.npr.org/2019/08/15/751070344/theres-no-such-thing-as-not-racist-in-ibram-x-kendis-how-to-be-an-antiracist) 8/15/2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/15/751070344/theres-no-such-thing-as-not-racist-in-ibram-x-kendis-how-to-be-an-antiracist>

Rebbe Nachman says about prayer: “Try to pray. Even if you fail, God appreciates the effort.” Try to be an anti-racist: even if you fail, the other will appreciate your effort.

Finally, you must act. If you find within yourself any of these past sins, then just like on Yom Kippur, do *teshuva*. First own it with your words, then change it through your actions. If your bank account allows it, put your money where your mouth is and donate to the efforts at work out there. Finally, when you can see that this is, perhaps a bigger problem than you realized, make a commitment. Even if you don’t yet know what shape that will take, create a resolution this Yom Kippur: By the time you’re reviewing your year next Rosh Hashanah, you will have done more than shake your head or wring your hands; you will have actually investigated what is happening around you to fight institutional racism and will have aligned yourself with the community of change. Remember the words of this morning’s Torah reading, “this commandment [to consider all humanity] is not too hard for you, it is not way up in Heaven and it is not far across the sea. The right words are already on your tongue waiting for you to speak them; the right actions are already in your hand waiting for you to do them.”⁵

This year, endeavor to say the words “I try not to be racist” and “I fight racism” ...and then do it. This is countercultural. Kendi reminds us that, “Racist ideas have defined our society since its beginning and can feel so natural and obvious as to be banal.... To be an antiracist is a radical choice in the face of this history, requiring radical reorientation of our consciousness.”⁶ May the beaming

⁵ based on Deuteronomy 30:11-16.

⁶ Kendi, Ibrim X. [How to be an Antiracist](#). One World Publishing, 2019.

light of antiracism shine forever into the future guiding us on our path and may we remain tireless in our pursuit of Justice.