

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

Many Canadians like to think that racism isn't a Canadian problem. "Oh, that's an American problem they say. Not here in Canada."

Therefore, it may have come as something of a surprise that a crowd of activists toppled a statue of Sir John Macdonald right here in Montreal. Perhaps that was the point of knocking the statue down: to let people know we do have a problem here. Sandy Hudson, founder of Black Lives Matter Toronto said that Canada and America have similar cultures, but -

The thing that is very different about Canada is the denial that we are faced with when we tell people outside of Black communities that this is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Elijah Olise, an activist who supported taking down the statue said that people were tired of waiting for it to be removed. He said, "In Canada, racism can be polite and covert, and this statue was a symbol for people who still have Macdonald's way of thinking. The statue was an open wound."

As important as Macdonald was for bringing together the disparate provinces into a united Canada, there's also no denying he was blatantly racist, especially for pushing through the residential school program for indigenous children, a program where the children were not only separated from their families but they were banned to speak their native languages. Many of the children were physically and sexually abused. The goal was to take away their indigenous culture and replace it with a European culture. It was a polite form of ethnic cleansing.

Canada is certainly not the only nation born in sin. As is well known, the founding fathers of our neighbor to the south owned slaves, even as they penned noble

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

words such as **“We hold these rights to be self-evident that all men are created equal...”**

Despite the high visibility of taking down a statue of Macdonald, the protests aren't primarily about the treatment of indigenous people a century ago, they're about the treatment of people of color today. And we do have problems in Canada today.

In June, Chantal Moore, an indigenous woman from Vancouver Island who had recently moved to Edmunston, New Brunswick was scared – someone was harassing her. Chantal's boyfriend was worried about her, and he called the police to do a wellness check. That's what the police are for, right? To keep us safe?

The police say she came out with a knife and threatened them. The cops responded by shooting five times, killing her on the spot.

Would the cops have responded the same way if Moore had been white? Maybe. It's possible the problem in this particular case was incompetence – lack of training in how to deal with mentally unstable people – rather than racism. But since people of color have a disproportionate amount of contact with the police, this harm falls disproportionately on them.

And there's no denying that this harm falls disproportionately on people of color: a report by the Ontario Human Rights Commission found that a black person in Toronto is nearly 20 times likelier to be shot and killed by a police officer than a white person. And the commission concluded racism was factor. Only 11% of blacks that were shot by police were carrying a gun. By comparison whites shot by police were carrying guns 20% of time. That means cops are shooting unarmed black men at a much higher rate than they are shooting unarmed white men.

Racism takes many forms. Another form is being harassed for the crime of “driving while Black.” *[I'm not going to go into detail now, however you can google Center*

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

for Research-Action on Race Relations or CRARR - Jonathan Woodley and his wife Stephanie Mucci, if that story doesn't sober us up, I'm not sure what will

Some people may think, well, OK, we have a problem with racism in policing. But at least we don't have a problem with racism in the Jewish community. After all, we know what it's like to be hated!

Sadly, that's not true either.

I grew up in an orthodox mitnagdishe community in London where it was common to hear references to "he's a prosta goy" "the sheygetz", she's a "shiktzeh" to name a few. We were imbued with the ideology of the "goyishe kop" and the superiority of the "Yiddishe kop." *[tell story of segals kosher]*

Such attitudes are found in Jewish mystical sources that praise the specialness of the Jewish soul. The most well-known explicitly racist source is Tanya, the writings of the Alter Rebbe, Schneur Zalman of Liady, the first Chabad rabbi. In Tanya the Alter Rebbe says there are two souls: one that everyone has that comes from the *kelipah* and *sitra achra*, the "other side," and one that is uniquely Jewish, that is a part of God above. Not only do Gentiles not have the Jewish soul, the other soul, the one that comes from the *kelipah* and *sitra achra*, comes from a bad place, while the one Jews have comes from a good place. Because that soul in non-Jews comes from an unclean place, any good that non-Jews do is only done for selfish motives. Tell that to the family that hid Anne Frank's family for years!

We have troubling concepts toward others in halacha. Many centuries after idol worship has disappeared from the communities we live, many people continue to refuse to allow a non-Jew to touch a bottle of wine, lest it be rendered unfit to drink from. And there's the concept of the "Shabbos goy," which is greatly abused in the Orthodox community. Gentiles are also entitled to rest, even if they don't have to

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

follow all the mitzvot. The halacha is clear that you are not allowed to ask a non-Jew to do something for you that you are not allowed to do for yourself. Yet people do that all the time.

Rabbi Reuven Hammer, z"l, one of the intellectual greats of the Conservative Movement, wrote an important paper, "The Status of Non-Jews in Jewish Law and Lore Today," calling on changes in halacha and changes in attitudes.

Within the Jewish community we also have problems. Ethiopian Jews face a lot of prejudice in Israel. Jews of color in North America are often met with surprise, or suspicion – **"what your Jewish, but your black, you must have converted"**. It took decades for Mizrahi Jews in Israel to make inroads, and the attitude of many Israelis toward Arabs is shockingly racist.

Torat Hamelech, a treatise written by a couple of extremist settler rabbis says that non-Jews are **"uncompassionate by nature,"** and therefore attacks on them are permissible because it helps to "curb their evil inclination." They also say that it's OK to kill enemy babies and children because "it is clear they will grow to harm us." One of the authors was indicted for incitement to violence.

What does the Torah teach us on these subjects? What does the Torah have to say about prejudice based on race or ethnicity? What does Torah teach us about protesting?

The Torah itself doesn't have a lot to say about different races. The beginning of Numbers chapter 12 has a verse that cries out for explanation:

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל-אַדֹּת הָאִשָּׁה הַכְּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי-אִשָּׁה כְּשִׁית לָקַח:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: "He married a Cushite woman!"

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

They then go on to complain that God also spoke to them, not just Moses. God gets mad at the pair, and Miriam is stricken with *tza'ra'at*.

“Cushite” is understood to be a Black African, Ethiopian in particular. Surely, they’re not making a racist comment, that there was something wrong with Moses marrying a Black woman?

In the rabbinic understanding, clearly not. The rabbis unanimously say that Miriam and Aaron were speaking up because Moses had separated from his wife, was no longer having relations with her. He claimed he always had to be prepared and in a state of ritual purity in case God summoned him. Miriam was sensitive to how his wife would feel neglected and was chastising him over this. They were saying Moses should maintain relations with his wife, if God needed to talk to someone immediately and he was impure He could always talk to Aaron or Miriam.

The 15th century Portuguese commentator Arbabenel brings race into his rationale – but in his interpretation, Aaron and Miriam are disapprovingly accusing Moses of racism:

And they said, "If he did this (separated from his wife) because Zipporah was black like a Cushite, behold when he married her, she was already a Cushite - can a Cushite change his skin? And nevertheless, he took her [as a wife] and had children from her. So, if so, what did he see now to separate from her?"

Rashi even says the blackness was beautiful: Regarding “Cushite woman” he says, “This tells us that all agreed as to her beauty just as all agree as to the blackness of an Ethiopian.”

In the Talmud (Shabbat 31a) there’s a great passage where someone made a 400 zuzim bet that he could get Hillel aggravated – even though Hillel’s patience was legendary. The bettor tested him with questions based on physical characteristics of different groups of people, all asked at times intended to be inconvenient to

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

Hillel: “Why do Babylonians have round heads? Why do people from Tadmor have bleary eyes? Why do Africans have wide feet?” Hillel answered patiently, without making any disparaging comments about the different groups – simply accepting the differences and pointing out there are evolutionary reasons for why people are different.

In the very beginning of the Torah, the first person, Adam, is created alone. In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 38a) the sages explain why:

Adam was created alone, and for what reason? Due to the righteous and due to the wicked. It was so that the righteous will not say: We are the children of the righteous, and righteousness is natural for us, so there is no need for us to exert ourselves to be righteous, and so that the wicked will not say: We are the children of the wicked and cannot change our ways.

We are all descended from Adam. Ultimately no one has a better pedigree than anyone else. The Talmud also teaches that it’s one of God’s special powers, that we are all created from the “mold” of Adam, he was the original, and yet each of us is individual and different than others.

And God makes clear that He doesn’t hold prejudices: in Amos 9:7 God says, “To me, Israelites, you’re just like the [black] Ethiopians. True I brought Israel out of Egypt, but I brought the Philistines out of Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir.”

The Torah is also very clear that everyone is to be treated equally under the law: in several places we are commanded *mishpat echad yiyeh lachem*, there shall be one manner of law for you, whether you are man or woman, Jew or Gentile, part of the community or a stranger, black or white.

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

Clearly, for anyone to be treated differently by law enforcement because of their skin color – or any other reason, whether it's gender, length of their hair, religion, or number of tattoos – is contrary to the values of the Torah.

And we're not only allowed to protest, we are obligated to protest.

The Torah commands us in Leviticus 19:17, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him."

The Talmud expands on this and tells us

Whoever can forbid his household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] his household; [if he can forbid] his fellow citizens, he is seized for [the sins of] his fellow citizens; if the whole world, he is seized for [the sins of] the whole world.

While we have an obligation to speak up when we see something wrong, there is the question of how to speak up.

Demonstrations are fine; riots are not.

There's a commandment known as *bal taschit*, do not destroy. It's based on a verse in Deuteronomy Chapter 20:

כִּי־תָצוּר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְּסָהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ לְנֹדַח עָלֶיהָ גֵרְוֹן בֵּי מַמְנוֹ
תֹאכְלִל וְאֵתוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת בֵּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבֹא מִפְּנֵיךְ בַּמְצוֹר:

When you besiege a city for many days, in making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by taking an ax to them; for you eat from them, and you may not cut them down; for is the tree of the field man, to come before you in siege?

From this verse the rabbis derive a commandment not to waste or destroy anything – and the wanton destruction of rioters would certainly be a violation of this command.

The Talmud teaches that violence should only be resorted to as a last resort. There's a story in tractate Gittin of the Talmud about an encounter between Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, and Vespasian, the Roman general preparing to destroy the

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

Temple. Vespasian knew that the rabbi was there to ask him not to destroy the Temple. Vespasian said,

“If there is a barrel of honey and a snake [derakon] is wrapped around it, wouldn't they break the barrel in order to kill the snake? In similar fashion, I am forced to destroy the city of Jerusalem in order to kill the zealots barricaded within it.” Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai was silent and did not answer. On hearing the story, a later rabbi said Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai should have responded: “In such a case, we take tongs, remove the snake, and kill it, and in this way we leave the barrel intact. So too, you should kill the rebels and leave the city as it is.”

What about taking down statues of people like Macdonald? Even if we agree it shouldn't be done in a riot, should it be done by the government itself? Should we be celebrating someone who was so racist against indigenous peoples?

In the Jewish tradition we do not insist that the people we look up to – even admire – be perfect, without flaw, without a history.

There are no more highly revered figures in the Jewish tradition than Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David. And yet each of them was a flawed human being. Each of them did things that we judge harshly today. Abraham passed his wife off as his sister and let her go into harm's way. Isaac did the same thing. Jacob extorted one blessing out of his brother and tricked him out of another. Moses had a short temper. David sent someone to a battle where he'd be killed so that he could take the guy's wife. Yet we still celebrate the good things they did.

Macdonald has earned his place in Canadian history. His role was vitally important in shaping the nation we have become today. Was he flawed? Yes. Would it make sense to add a plaque that talks about his legacy, the good and the bad, including

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

his treatment of indigenous peoples? Yes. But we can't, and shouldn't, erase him from our history.

These decisions are context sensitive. The situation is not necessarily the same for statues of Confederate generals in America. They lost the war. They rebelled against America. It does not make sense for America to celebrate rebels who fought specifically for their right to keep slaves.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

We are now living in a time when that arc is visibly bending. We are making progress. The top RCMP officer in Alberta, Deputy Commission Curtis Zablocki, is an example that shows our police departments can learn and grow. In mid-June he said he didn't believe there was systemic racism in policing in Canada – he said racist individuals can be found anywhere, but it wasn't a systemic problem.

Then he did some research and had some conversations with indigenous leaders and colleagues – and he changed his mind. He said, "These have been conversations that have challenged my perceptions and made it clear that systemic racism does exist in the RCMP."

We are making progress, but we all need to do our part. As former US Attorney General Eric Holder said, "the arc bends toward justice, but it only bends toward justice because people pull it towards justice. It doesn't happen on its own."

Even more fundamental than the teaching that we are all descended from Adam is what the Torah tells us at the very beginning of creating of man:

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

All Black Lives Matter – Jewish Cultural Culpability

We are all created in the divine image, male and female, black and white, all of us.
When we pursue justice, as the Torah commands us, we are acting in a Godly way.
Shanah Tovah