



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום

Racism & Judaism: Why Jews Must Join The Fight Against Racial Injustice

Tyler Johnson

Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders
Summer Capstone August 2020

As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence below.

Racism & Judaism: Why Jews Must Join The Fight Against Racial Injustice

“Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world.” -- Mishnah Sanhedrin 4

On July 6th, 2016, at a traffic stop in St. Paul, Minnesota, Philandro Castile was shot seven times in his car, the aftermath live-streamed on Facebook by his girlfriend for the world to see. All because of a broken taillight. Another world destroyed. On May 25th of this year, George Floyd died in police custody in Minneapolis, pinned underneath three police officers over an alleged counterfeit \$20 bill used to purchase cigarettes. Floyd’s death has been the rallying cry for renewed fervor in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. The difference this time is that more white people have joined in support of the outcry for change.

At a risk to personal health, people from all backgrounds have gathered together in protest, demanding reform and lasting change. But where was this unified front during the Ferguson unrest in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown in 2014? Much of what happened in Ferguson is repeating across the country now: weeks of protests, police employing the use of tear gas against peaceful protesters, and an escalation of already existing racial tension. Despite national coverage of events, Ferguson remained an isolated incident. Protests, for the most part, were largely confined to the immediate Ferguson area. Eventually, the police officer in the incident was acquitted of all charges, and news coverage began to shift. The nation moved on.

Unlike in 2014, local and national Jewish organizations have come out with statements that express their outrage at the death of George Floyd, reaffirming their commitment against institutionalized racism, and the need to restart dialogue. While this is great on an organizational level, and I admire the advocacy work that is being done, I remind us to reflect on why we are acting only now. Action from a place of guilt and a feeling of necessity is not conducive to positive change if we do not understand the reason why we need to act.

As a young Black Jew, I have confronted people’s biases, prejudice, and racial profiling. I have no doubt I will continue to do so as my life progresses. I regularly find myself in the position where I have to educate other people, both people from my own age group and adults, to be cognizant of what they say and how it can be perceived as offensive. More often than not, this comes from within our own community. Much of what I have to say falls on deaf ears. I have been asked whether I am actually Jewish, stared at while attending different synagogues, and have been told that I am too sensitive when I talk about the issue of racism. There is an issue in the Jewish community of the invalidation of the struggles of Jews of color and a wider lack of acceptance. At best, some people truly just haven't met someone like me. At worst, some people cannot look beyond the small scope of racial and religious identities to see the makeup of a whole person. This state of cultural tribalism, the view that Black people are some type of ‘other,’ questioning the identity of Jews of color, cannot persist. Jews are a diverse people and are located throughout the world. Not all Jews share race and socioeconomic status. By accepting a limited narrative, we

are creating divisions within our community. If these divisions exist in our community, how can we, as a minority, put down another minority? We would be hypocrites.

We cannot pursue justice when we choose to be blind to injustice of others. We can't claim we support the Black community without actually talking to the Black community. White-passing Jews must be willing to listen first, then act. If more people listened to the struggles of Black people, then this problem would have ended long ago. For positive action to take place, we have to understand that it must come from a place of moral urgency, and not obligation because we feel that the issue of racism has become 'too much.' If I choose to not speak up, than I am no better than those that do not speak when there is anti-Semitism or any other type of discrimination.

Now more than ever, we need to help in saving Black lives, in saving the potential of entire worlds. As Jews, we often use the phrase "never again" in reference to the atrocities of the Holocaust, that we must prevent an event such as the oppression and genocide of mainly Jews and other minorities. This needs to be extended to the suffering of Black Americans that has been happening for centuries in this country. We, as a community, as people, need to show that we can be more than reactionary and just sympathetic. We need to be proactive. We need to be another voice in the ongoing conversation. "Never again" is happening once more, but this time, we have the power to stop the hate and discrimination before it worsens. If not, I fear we will embark down a dark path toward a future that I dare not imagine.

Remember, "Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."