

A LESSON FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITY: RECONCILING MULTIPLE TRUTHS

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Why is it that as Jews, and especially within the Orthodox community, we have such a hard time seeing structural racial injustice in America?

I think there are real reasons why many in the white-appearing Ashkenazi Jewish community have a hard time seeing and understanding the structures of racial injustice that Black Americans know all too well. Only if we start to think about the blind spots that prevent us from seeing those structures of injustice, can we do something and finally start to see them. Only in seeing can we take the actions we need to address them.

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The first and lowest stakes piece is this: **the Black American story is so different from our American story that for us it doesn't compute.** My grandfather came here from Poland in the 1930s, served in the American army during WWII, came home, built a life for himself, established a business, and left a legacy (material and financial) to pass on to my mother. This is what the scholars call the intergenerational transfer of wealth — from being an immigrant off the boat to building and passing on material advantage to his children.

Because that's our American story, it can be hard for us to assimilate and take in what the story of African-Americans has been.

We need to understand that our story is not everyone's story, and we have to therefore really, really hear, study, listen, and learn other people's stories to understand their experiences.

But there's something even further than that. **There's a feeling that acknowledging the “other's” story takes away from my story.** If I acknowledge that my grandfather, when he came here from Eastern Europe, through no planning, fault, or design of his own, ended up the heir to a racial scheme that with his white skin conferred privilege and advantage upon him — to say that sounds like I'm saying his accomplishments are less, that he built less, that he achieved less on his own. I think for many of us, it feels like that takes away from our families' stories — those boot strap stories, the “making it” stories of which we're so proud.

We have to give ourselves permission to know that we can hold multiple truths at once. We can know that our grandparents worked, strove, and accomplished, and can take pride in that — and *still* know that other people's grandparents worked hard and strove and were *prevented* from accomplishing by structures that disadvantaged them and didn't disadvantage our grandparents. Once we recognize that we can hold multiple truths, we can move on to the next issue. Which is that **it's very hard for us as Jews — even in America and with the blessings America has given us — to see ourselves as being in a position of power.** That has become even harder over the past few years as anti-Semitic attacks have proliferated. The security around our shuls, schools, and houses of worship has increased our sense of vulnerability, and the threat is all the greater.



Given all that, it really is hard for us to think of ourselves as occupying a position of power. You may say, “But I feel so vulnerable. I feel so nervous walking to temple or taking my child to their day school.” But let’s return to the notion that we can acknowledge that two things can be true at once. Anti-Semitism is true and real and present and more frightening now than it was fifteen years ago. It’s also true that when I get pulled over by a police officer and they look at me in the car, they see a white person and that changes how they relate to me.

The last and most difficult thing that keeps us from hearing and seeing is the extent to which we as beneficiaries of these racist systems are implicated in them. If we have accumulated wealth through systems that have advantaged some people and disadvantaged others; if we have built institutions, structures, and communities; **if we have gotten our education and our jobs, not in ways that simply reflected our merit, our bootstraps, our effort, but also reflect profound societal systems and structures that helped us and disadvantaged others, what does that say?** How does that make me feel about myself and my community? Sometimes I think it makes us so uncomfortable we just turn away. “I’m a nice person, I’m not a racist, so I don’t have to get involved.” But this isn’t about our personal goodness, or lack thereof. It’s about structures that have been built and maintained. Sometimes these are structures we didn’t build, but slid into. Sometimes these are structures we unconsciously reinforce without realizing, and we have to own when these are structures we actually helped to build because they advantaged us without our thinking about how they were disadvantaging others. Entire structures in the United States that have been built by the law and enforced by the law that we have to face and acknowledge in order to be able to start thinking about how we can dismantle them.

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We as a Jewish community don’t need to feel threatened by this. We need to know that we can hold our stories and our truths and our veneration of our ancestors and still hear other people’s stories. We can retain an awareness of the ways and the places in which we are vulnerable and even powerless, and nevertheless, acknowledge the ways and the places in which we have and yield power. **To know that we may not be solely responsible for creating systems of oppression, but that we have lived in and often benefited from them. This gives us an obligation to look at them, identify them, face them, and think about what we’re going to do to dismantle them.**

