

A Matter of Color

I'll never forget when I first became aware of race.

I must have been about three years old. I looked at Lillie Fraiser who



was helping to raise me and basically part of our family.

Her skin was dark. I asked her, "Lillie, why is your skin black?"

She gave me one of her classic wide smiles which still make me smile 46 years later and said, "Dahvid," that's the way she would pronounce my Hebrew name, which is what my parents called me, not David.

"Dahvid, I'm not black, I'm chocolate. What color are you?" "White," I responded. "You're not white," she stated strongly, "you're vanilla."

I nodded my three-year-old blond-haired head in clear affirmation.

And I suppose that's why I never thought of myself as white and I guess it's why I have always loved black and white cookies – the perfect combination.

[For you Seinfeld fans, "look to the cookie!"](#)

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Growing up in Manhattan, I was aware of race, but felt close to black people, even though I did not really have much experience with them.



My nursery school was the [14th Street YMHA](#); my kindergarten was at [Ramaz](#), a leading Jewish day school. There were very few black residents in [Peter Cooper Village](#), the large development where I lived for my first six years. There were no people of Color in my [shul](#).

My parents taught me that there is no higher value than to support the underdog – the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, those who are marginalized, and certainly, that would include the black community.

That value comes from the Torah which teaches 36 times that we should care for the *ger*, the stranger, often in conjunction with the *yatom* and the *almanah*, the orphan and the widow – these three groups were most vulnerable in the ancient world. The stranger, the orphan, and the widow had no one to protect them, to provide for them. So the Torah declared: YOU better make sure that YOU take care of them!

The Torah is teaching us that the measure of a society is how well it takes care of those on the margins, those who are most vulnerable.

Back to me growing up thinking about race.

How did the way I was taught to care for blacks play out?

Sometimes in trivial ways.

As I grew older, whenever I would watch a sporting event where I did not have a vested interest, I would inevitably root for the team which was not favored to win. Further, if there were two players and one was black, I was definitely rooting for the black player. My favorite player was a speedy black center-fielder named Mickey Rivers and I modeled my game after him.

After hundreds of years of slavery, Jim Crow laws, redlining, and more, it was the least I could do.

And I never considered myself really white, I considered myself a Jew. I wore a *kippah* which made me readily identifiable as a Jew, but it did not hide my so-called whiteness. Seeing me from the back, the *kippah* said: "Jew;" from the front, I was white.

But, of course, we all know that I could easily slip off my Jewish skin, take off my *kippah*, that I can put on a baseball cap in uncomfortable places or situations and a black person can never do that.

Even with all my background, with all my years with Lillie, with whom I was very close, with all the values that I was taught, with all that, let me make an uncomfortable confession tonight: I am a racist.

Not a rabid racist.

Not a racist like the ones you might watch on the internet.

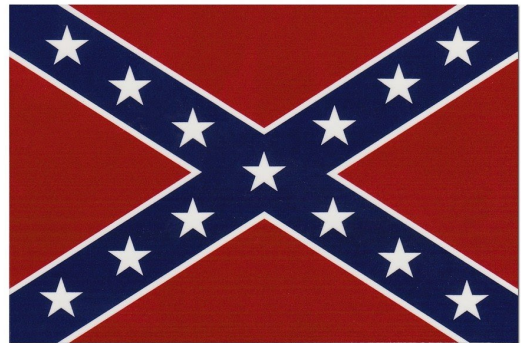
No, I have no Confederate flag, no statues of traitors like Jefferson Davis.

Not like some of our politicians or television hosts or political prognosticators who are clearly worse, but I have internalized certain racist

attitudes and assumptions that pervade our society and culture so deeply that they have made their way into my thinking, into me.

Perhaps they have made their way into you. Into your thinking.

Perhaps you don't even realize it.



Maybe we should add that into our confessions as we move through *Yom Kippur* this year.

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Four months ago, we all were shocked into awareness by the horrific 8 minute and 46-second public execution, public murder, of George Floyd.

Watching that video filmed in broad daylight, with four police officers calmly squeezing the very life out of Floyd's body made me, like many others in this country, realize that we have a very serious problem.

This is not just a police problem, which it is. But it is far deeper than that.

It is a societal problem and a moral problem.

We are a racist country.

And we have not come to terms with that.

On a personal level.

On a communal level

On a systemic level.

On a national level.

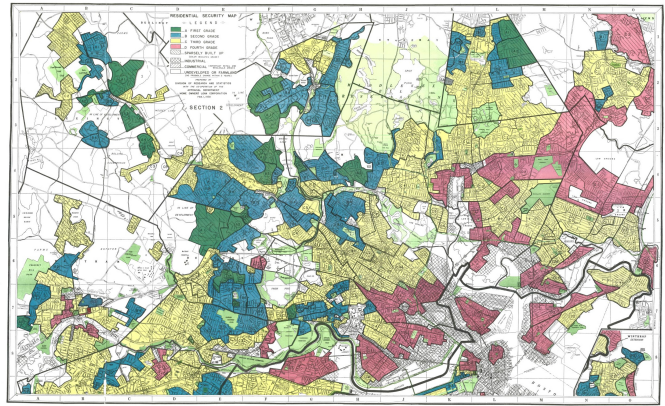
This is not a small issue.

It's not like the fact that we need to fix all the broken physical infrastructure – roads, bridges, railroads – in the country, which we also need to do.

We must undertake a major change in our societal infrastructure, in our culture, and in ourselves.

As did [South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), we need to face our racist past and PRESENT.

We need to explore serious issues, like slavery, the infatuation with symbols of hate including the Confederate Flag, the question of reparations – not just from the Civil War, but from 20th-century policies like



redlining that prevented blacks from being able to move into more desirable neighborhoods, which meant that their children could not get access to better schools which meant that they could not move ahead as their white peers did.

Why was I, who went to an elite high school on Manhattan's Upper East Side and took AP American History followed by American History in an elite university, why was I never taught about the [Tulsa Race Massacre](#) which destroyed a successful African-American community in 1921? "The Black Wall Street" was the way this Greenwood area of Tulsa was referred to – and it was the wealthiest black community in the United States. But, hundreds were killed and many hundreds more injured. 35 square blocks were destroyed. This was never mentioned. Not a word. Not even on anyone's radar.

Why?

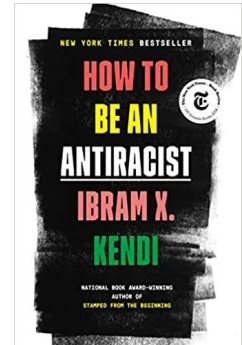
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So, we here at Emunah have been talking about this issue.

At the beginning of June, Temple Emunah formed several Racial Justice book groups to read and discuss these issues, along with an action

group, and a steering committee. Over 50 Emunah-ites have been involved in this holy work over the summer, leading up to reading Ibram X. Kendi's book: *How to be an Anti-Racist*.

One of his deepest teachings, however, is not that we are or are not racists; it is that policies, procedures and decisions can either reinforce racist ideology or can work to build an anti-racist world.



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Let me address two questions you might have this evening.

First, what does this have to do with Judaism?

It's *Kol Nidrei!*

A lot!

First, let us not forget that Jews of color are members of our community. They are members of our families!

Before we discuss anything else, before we talk about helping other people, let's realize that we are helping our own people.

As Hillel says, *Im ein ani li, mi li* – if I am not for myself, who will be for me? So, if we are not going to tackle racism, we are not helping ourselves, our partners, our children, our grandchildren. Let's fix our problems before we start fixing other people's problems.

This IS our problem – one that impacts ourselves, our family members.

Further, even if there were NO Jews of Color, we would still stand up in solidarity with people of color because it's the right thing to do. Hillel's

teaching does not end with himself. “*U’kh’she’ani l’atzmi ma ani* – but if I am only for myself, what am I?

Just as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was called to march for Black Civil Rights in 1963, we are called 57 years later to complete the work of racial justice.

Some Jews feel that we should not be involved. After all, the large Jewish immigration to the United States occurred after the Civil War. Ah, but there were Jewish slaveholders before the Civil War and the benefits of free slave labor are still with us, built into the fabric of our country. In fact, we cannot ignore the fact that Jews were intimately involved in the financing of redlining practices.

The second question or issue or complaint I have heard is that the Black Lives Matter movement is anti-Israel and thus, we should not support it.

Let me say two things about this.

One – there is a large movement called BLM – Blacks Lives Matter and there is an actual organization called the Movement for Black Lives; those are two separate things. The first has no position on Israel, while the second one did make a small mention four years ago.

Two – as of a month ago that organization – [the Movement for Black Lives – changed its platform and removed any mention of Israel.](#)

So, that’s a step in the right direction.

Most Jewish organizations including national ones we are a part of, however, have put aside this issue, and felt that saving black lives is more

important than some minor plank in a 10-page document written four years ago that had no practical import anyhow.

As my friend, classmate, and colleague, now the head of the [Rabbinical Assembly](#) and the [United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism](#), Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal said that in the unlikely event that this year's platform includes the criticisms of Israel, "We'll be able to express our disapproval of that particular piece of their platform, but that does not affect our desire to see change when it comes to systemic racism and justice for every person in our society."

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So, we are going to work on this. We are going to think about the fact that we live in a racist country and our *shul* is pretty Ashkenormormative – meaning that our community is predominantly made up of white, Ashkenazi Jews. We need to think about how to better integrate Jews of color and work on our biases.

For example:

- What do we think of when we hear "Jew"?
- Do we imagine a white person?
- It is important for us to be in deep relationships across race and religion.
- What does this require of white people?
- Think of a room full of white people. What would the reaction be if a person of color came in? Would they feel uncomfortable?
- Have you ever been the only white person in a room full of black people? How did you feel?

-What is the white supremacy culture we are swimming in? What does it look like? How does it manifest in our communities?

In order to dismantle racism, we need to constantly recognize, appreciate, and transform the ways in which we are reinforcing racism every day.

My friends, we have much work to do. Here, at Emunah, this will be a project like our [Keruv Committee](#) that has been working for almost three decades now to make sure we are most welcoming to families that include a partner who is not Jewish, and to those who are [LGBTQ+](#) and we still have more work to do there.

I imagine that this project will be on-going for years at Emunah, in our society, and in our country and in ourselves.

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We have begun a serious process of evaluating whether



Greater Boston
Interfaith Organization

Temple Emunah should join the GBIO – Greater Boston Interfaith Organization.

The [Greater Boston Interfaith Organization \(GBIO\)](#) is a broad-based, non-partisan, interfaith, multiracial power organization rooted in Greater Boston's neighborhoods and congregations. Made up of 41 dues-paying member institutions representing more than 50,000 people, GBIO is dedicated to making our city a better place for all of us to live and thrive. For more than 20 years, GBIO has worked to improve housing and

healthcare, reform our criminal justice system, address racial disparities in our city, and rebuild schools and neighborhoods, among other issues.

GBIO membership has been discussed here on and off for years. The recent events have placed it on the top of our agenda and our board created an ad-hoc committee to discuss other synagogues' experiences with the GBIO. In addition, the board will be soliciting additional input from the congregation in the coming weeks.

It is my sincere hope that we formally become part of this amazing interfaith body, as it works to make the larger Boston community a little more just.

Joining the GBIO would be putting our money where our mouth has been for years and allow us to be in deeper relationships with many communities of color.

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After six years in Manhattan, my family moved to a very white area in West Hempstead and Franklin Square, Long Island. I did not have a black friend.

But three years later, we moved to Teaneck, NJ. Teaneck was the first suburb in the country to voluntarily desegregate its public schools. It was and remains a diverse community and that was a factor in the move.

I got to play in the Little League a few blocks from my house and attend the Teaneck Sports and Arts day camp for many summers with a diverse group of children from many different ethnic backgrounds.

My next-door neighbor was black and Denard and I would play ball together regularly.

Lillie's story did not end well. It follows a pattern that we need to retire. Both her children predeceased her. Her son was murdered by gun violence in Harlem – which continues to motivate me to work to end the scourge of gun violence in our country – and her daughter, who lived with her and had put herself through college to become a teacher, died young of lung cancer.

My mother was the only white person at her son's funeral and my parents attended her daughter's.

But Lillie remained part of our extended family beyond her retirement after 25 years of service. She and her daughter attended both my wedding and my sister's.

They were the only black guests.

Each of us brought our children to meet her and my sister, whose son was born after Lillie's death named him for her and spoke of her at the *brit milah* – his circumcision. Of course, all four of us were there crying at Lillie's funeral. We need to open opportunities for our black Americans to live safer lives, more productive lives, healthier lives.

And we have much more work to do as individuals, as a *shul*, as a society and a country. I know you will all be my partners in this holy work.

