

JEWISH PERSPECTIVES ON RACIAL JUSTICE AT THE SHABBAT DINNER TABLE



Despite vast steps towards racial equality since the Civil Rights Movement, racism is still pervasive today. Racism, the systematic discrimination of people based on skin color, permeates the everyday lives of People of Color on interpersonal, political, institutional, and cultural levels. We are a part of a multiethnic and multiracial Jewish community – and yet the normative view of a Jew in the U.S., both inside and outside the Jewish community, is a white, Ashkenazi Jew from Eastern Europe.

Jewish values call us to wrestle with how our Jewish identity connects to race, to white cultural norms and privileges, and to the need to address racial inequity both within and outside the Jewish community. We believe that Friday night can be a time and the Shabbat dinner table can be a place for us to move towards these conversations about racial justice with courage.

– REPAIR THE WORLD AND ONETABLE

OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS¹

No two Shabbat dinners are the same, and we have worked to provide resources and options that will allow you to choose how best to frame the conversation for your guests.

Some hosts may choose to pose open-ended questions and invite their guests to consider their responses and share their thoughts. This [Guide to Respectful Conversations](#) is an excellent starting place to learn how to create open and brave space.

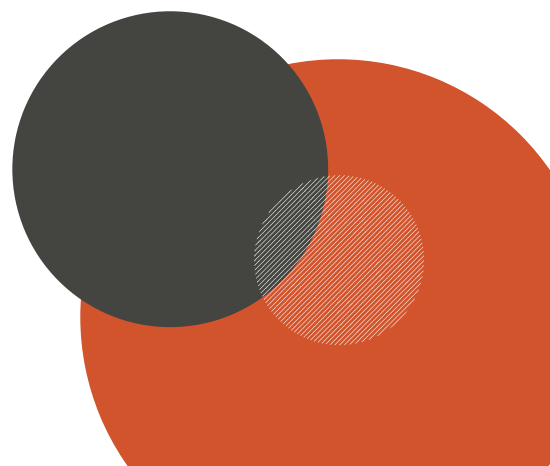
- What are some of your earliest memories of race?
- During your childhood, what messages did you get about race and racism from your family, community, and society in general?
- What messages did you receive about your racial identity in particular?
- If you identify as Jewish, what messages have you received within the Jewish community about race and racism?
- Who are the people who have most influenced your thinking about race and racial justice?

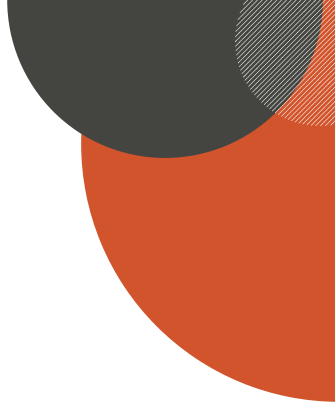
¹ Questions adapted by Suzanne Feinspan from resource created by Avodah

TEXTS TO SHARE

Torah study, the exploration of Jewish knowledge with a partner or small group, is a deeply-rooted intellectual and spiritual practice. We encourage hosts to print one or both of the following texts to share with their guests, to read aloud and discuss. These texts illuminate the relationship between Judaism, race, and racial justice, how and when some Jews gained access to whiteness,² and what it means for the Jews that were not allowed entry. See this [Racial Justice Glossary](#) to help illuminate the language.

² While “white” is a category of race that has been created and accepted by a society to refer to white-skinned people, “whiteness” is a social construction, behavior, ideology and system that embraces white culture, experiences, and appearances as the norm and relegates all else as “the other” through explicit and implicit violence. In order to maintain white culture, experiences, and appearance as superior to any other in power and status, “whiteness” expands and contracts to give different communities and identities access to privileges, rights, opportunity, and power in society. Whiteness is often invisible for those within it, and alienating for those outside of it.





Answer these questions honestly: If I walk into your shul for Friday night service would you sit next to me or would you allow one person to occupy an entire pew? If I walked into your shul right about the time you were picking up your child would you presume I was a nanny? If you sat across from me on the subway and noticed the Magen David around my neck, would you smile at me? Or wonder why I was wearing it? If I were shopping for challah in your shop on Friday afternoon, would you wish me a good Shabbos?

I pose these questions not just because they are my experiences, but to encourage us to take a look inward and remember our history as Jews. I'm sure many of us have heard an anti-Semitic remark that shook us to the core, but for the most part secular Jews can walk around not attracting much attention. But not long ago to be a Jew was a bad thing, something to be loathed, something to try to hide. Through the promise of America, many Jews were able to start anew simply by changing their last name. In the US Jews became "white," and with that whiteness came privilege. But as Jews don't we also have the responsibility to remember what life was like before this era of unprecedented privilege? We're taught to never forget about our experience as outsiders, and yet, we have.

– ERIKA DAVIS³
"TALKING HONESTLY ABOUT JEWS AND RACISM"

³ Erika Davis is an educator and writer; her blog, "Black, Gay and Jewish: A Gay Black Woman's Discovery of Her Jewish Self," shares the story of her conversion to Judaism.

But maybe you're one of those Jews who believes one has to first look out for their own. You might not care about racial profiling. It's the only way to stop "those people," you say. You might not care about stop-and-frisk. It's for their own good, you say. If you're not guilty, then you should have nothing to hide, you nod. You think racial profiling and stop-and-frisk doesn't happen to Jews, so it's not a Jewish problem to think about. It only happens to "those people."

You are wrong.

Because here's the thing: Some of your people are "those people." Some of "those people" are your people. There are Jews, here, in these United States, this bastion of freedom for Jews escaping pogroms and Inquisitions and Holocausts, who cannot walk down the street without a fear for their lives from the very authorities who are supposed to protect them. There are Jews who will always be approached by police as a suspect, never as a citizen. Who will always be viewed as just another criminal savage who hasn't been put away yet. A perp who doesn't have a mugshot yet. And there aren't enough streimels or black hats or tallitot in the world to protect them.

– MANISHTANA⁴
"ERIC GARNER, C'EST TOI"

⁴ MaNishtana is the pseudonym of Shais Rishon, a Brooklyn-based African American Orthodox Jewish author, blogger, graphic artist, and public speaker.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Your guests may not need prompts in order to engage in a meaningful discussion around the dinner table based on these texts. Other hosts may want guiding questions to help unpack the elements in this Torah study.
- How do these texts illuminate ways in which racism operates within the Jewish community?
- Do the following texts make a connection between anti-semitism and racism? If so, how do those oppressions interact and intersect?
- Based on these texts, why and how should the Jewish community engage in racial justice work?
- What are some concrete next steps for you and your community?

QUOTE REFLECTION

Short quotes, rather than full texts, can also provide a powerful opportunity for your guests to reflect on racial justice. Below, we offer two quotes and several reflection prompts as inspiration.

I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.

– FREDERICK DOUGLASS⁵

“NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE,” 1845

For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.

– RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL⁶

“FOLLOWING IN MY FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS: SELMA 40 YEARS LATER,” 1965

When Heschel marched with King almost 60 years ago he said he prayed with his feet. Did Heschel know that he was paraphrasing Douglass? Was he using the words of a freed slave turned abolitionist to drive home his point about his time with King? I'm not sure. But in these 60 years while much has changed in regards to racial equality, we still do not live in a world that is racially equal. The institutionalized and systematic racism in our country exists because we allow it to with our complacency and our willingness to look the other way...”

– ERIKA DAVIS, “PRAYING WITH OUR LEGS IN 2017,” 2017

- Which of the quotes speaks more to you? Why?
- If you grew up in the Jewish community, what is the narrative you have heard around Jewish communal involvement in the Civil Rights movement? How can that narrative explicitly or implicitly give permission for Jewish institutions to stand on the sidelines when it comes to engaging in racial justice today?
- Have you ever felt like you were “praying with your legs” or like “your legs were praying”? Have you had any experiences where an action felt religious or spiritual?

⁵ 19th century abolitionist, activist, politician, and author

⁶ 20th century Jewish theologian and Civil Rights activist