

The Four Adults

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In the Passover haggadah, we tell the story of the four children: one who is wise, one who is wicked, one who is simple, and one who does not know how to ask questions. In reality, we know that no one child is fully wise, wicked, simple, or silent. At one point or another, every child – and for that matter, every adult – demonstrates each of these characteristics. Tonight, we use the example of the four children to illustrate the different ways that some of us attempt to grapple with racism in our society. As with the four children, many of us carry aspects of all four categories within ourselves. We shine a light on these pieces of ourselves as a way of acknowledging them, affirming that these responses are common, and strengthening ourselves to do better in confronting racism.

The eager adult asks: “When’s the next meeting?”

It is wonderful to show up to events, actions, trainings, and community spaces as an act of solidarity. And it’s even more wonderful to do so in a thoughtful way, undergirded by reflective, introspective work as well. Not only do we have to show up to public work, we have to make sure we’re also working on ourselves and within our own communities. Your family, your friends, your co-workers: close relationships and real conversations with them will help to build the just society we all envision.

The frustrated adult asks: “Why does this have to do with me? I’m not racist.”

Midrash Tanchuma teaches, we dare not ask: “What do the affairs of society have to do with me? Why should I trouble myself with the people’s voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace! One who does this causes destruction in the world.” It is everyone’s responsibility to actively pursue justice. Inaction perpetuates the status quo. We must take responsibility for the ways in which we have failed to prevent acts of injustice both small and large.

Racism isn’t about good or bad people, moral or immoral singular acts. One of the frightening aspects of growing up and living in a racist society is that we don’t always get to choose even our own thoughts. From a young age, society sends us subtle, often-unnoticed messages about other people. Implicit biases are purposes of social and/or political correctness.” Often these biases are directly in contradiction with our explicit beliefs. Our unconscious biases have real consequences in employment, housing, health care, policing, and other social institutions. Taking responsibility for those biases and making conscious efforts to undo them and mitigate their effects on our actions is an important first step for us all.

The skeptical adult asks, “Why is there so much anger right now? Wasn’t the killing of Michael Brown just an isolated incident?”

The publicized killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and too many more Black men and boys – as well as many Black women, girls, and trans women – have forced America to confront a horrifying and shameful piece of our society that has been with us for centuries. Police violence is something that many communities of color know all too intimately. Between 2006 and 2012, data show that white police officers killed black people nearly twice a week in the US. This data is almost certainly an undercount. Further, reports show that 18% of the Black people killed during those seven years were under age 21, compared to 8.7% of white people. The killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager, in Ferguson Missouri, was not an isolated incident. Only a few weeks ago, the Department of Justice report found definitively that the Ferguson police department and court system had a documented history of racial bias of astounding proportions.

The anger we are hearing and talking about is not new. It's a justified outrage over the killing of people who look like our neighbors, our families, ourselves. Violence is the effect, not the cause, of racial oppression. We must make sure that specific acts of violence are not seen in isolation, allowing them to retreat from the news cycles into just a memory.

And as for the adult who doesn't know how to begin this conversation,

We empower them. Us. Each other. The problems are enormous and the conversations complicated. But we remember the midrash, or Rabbinic story, of Nachshon. When the Israelites fled Egypt, and came to the Red Sea, the people cried out in despair as Pharaoh's army closed in on them. But Nachshon, with full faith, did not wait. He waded into the Sea until the water came up to his nose. Then, and only then, the Sea parted. Sometimes we must wade in – further than we ever thought possible or safe – before change is possible. As we read in Pirkei Avot, "It is not your responsibility to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." So take a step into the sea – it's time.