

The Four People

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On Passover, the Haggadah speaks about four sons; one who is wise, one who is evil, one who is innocent and one who doesn't know to ask

Tonight, let's speak about four people striving to engage in racial justice. They are a complicated constellation of identity and experience; they are not simply good or bad, guileless or silent. They are Jews of Color and white Jews. They are Mizrahi, Sephardi, and Ashkenazi; they are youth, middle-aged, and elders. They are a variety of people who are at different stages of their racial justice journey. Some of them have been on this journey for their entire lives, and for some, today is the first day. Some of them are a part of us, and others are quite unfamiliar.

What do they say? They ask questions about engaging with racial justice as people with a vested interest in Jewishness and Jewish community. **How do we answer?** We call them in with compassion, learning from those who came before us.

WHAT DOES A QUESTIONER SAY?

"I support equality, but the tactics and strategies used by current racial justice movements make me uncomfortable."

Time and time again during the journey through the desert, the Israelites had to trust Moses and God's vision of a more just future that the Israelites could not see themselves. As they wandered through the desert, eager to reach the Promised Land, they remained anxious about each step on their shared journey. They argued that there must be an easier way, a better leader, and a better God. They grumbled to Moses and Aaron in Exodus 16:3, "If only we had died by the hand of God in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the cooking pot, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole community to death." Despite their deep misgivings, they continued onward.

As we learn in our Passover retelling, the journey toward liberation and equity can be difficult to map out. In the midst of our work, there are times when we struggle to truly

identify our own promised land. We see this challenge in various movements, whether for civil rights, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, workers' rights, and others. In our retelling of these struggles for justice, we often erase conflicts of leadership, strategy debates, or even the strong contemporaneous opposition to their successes. Only when we study these movements in depth do we appreciate that all pushes for progress and liberation endure similar struggles, indecision, and pushback.

WHAT DOES A NEWCOMER SAY?

"How do I reach out and engage with marginalized communities in an authentic and sustained way?"

We tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt year after year; it is a story not only about slavery and freedom, but also a story of transition. At its core, the Passover story is about the process of moving from oppression to liberation. It informs us that liberation is not easy or fast, but a process of engagement and relationship building.

As the Israelites wandered in the desert, they developed systems of accountability and leadership. Every person contributed what they could given their skills, passions, and capacity to create the mishkan, the Israelites' spiritual sanctuary in the desert. As it says in Exodus 35:29, "[T]he Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that the LORD, through Moses, had commanded to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the LORD."

Those of us engaging or looking to engage in racial justice work can learn from that example. We need to show up, and keep showing up. We can spend time going to community meetings, trainings, marches, protests, and other actions while practicing active listening and self-education. Only by each person exploring their own privileges and oppressions, whatever they may be, can we show up fully and thoughtfully in this racial justice work.

WHAT DOES A JEW OF COLOR SAY?

"What if I have other interests? Am I obligated to make racial justice my only priority?"

The work of racial justice is not only for People of Color; it is something everyone must be engaged in. Most Jews of Color are happy to be engaged in racial justice, whether professionally, personally, or a mix of both. However, we find too often the burden of the work falls on our shoulders. The work of racial justice cannot only fall to Jews of Color.

Instead, all Jews who are engaged in tikkun olam, repairing the world, should be engaged in the work of racial justice. Following the leadership of Jews of Color, white Jews must recognize their own personal interest in fighting to dismantle racist systems. When white Jews commit to racial justice work, it better allows Jews of Color to take time for self-care by stepping away from the work or focusing on a different issue. As Rabbi Tarfon writes in Pirke Avot 2:21, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either."

WHAT DOES AN AVOIDER SAY?

"I am so scared of being called a racist, I don't want to engage in any conversations about race."

Engaging in conversations about difficult and personal subjects takes time and practice. When Joseph first began having prophetic dreams as a young man, he insensitively told his brothers that despite his youth, they would eventually bow down to him. In Genesis 37:8, Joseph's brothers respond by asking, "Do you mean to rule over us?" And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.' However, as he matured, his dreams became his method of survival. As Joseph learned how to share his dreams with people in power, he was able to reunite with his family and create a period of incredible prosperity in Egypt.

We will make mistakes when engaging in racial justice. It is part of the process. Engaging in racial justice conversations can be painful and uncomfortable; it is also absolutely essential. We must raise up the dignity and complexity in others that we see in ourselves and our loved ones. Empathy for people of different backgrounds, cultures, religions, and races moves us to have these difficult conversations. Compassion for ourselves allows us to keep engaging through any guilt or discomfort.

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