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# Commitment to Understanding and Understanding Commitment: Reflections and Dilemmas at the Intersection of Racial Justice and My Jewish Identity

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Commitment to Understanding and Understanding Commitment:  
Reflections and Dilemmas at the Intersection of Racial Justice and My Jewish Identity

Devra Goldstein

May 2017

A Master's Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts,  
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in the department of International Development, Community, and Environment

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Eric DeMeulenaere, Chief Instructor

## Abstract

### Commitment to Understanding and Understanding Commitment: Reflections and Dilemmas at the Intersection of Racial Justice and My Jewish Identity

Devra Goldstein

As discussions of intersectionality and justice deepen and expand, this paper calls activists to include analyses of antisemitism in identity politics and organizing initiatives, most notably racial justice. I situate my critique of the silence around antisemitism in current analyses of antisemitism in social justice organizing. I draw on traditions of Yiddish storytelling and share five autoethnographic narratives from my personal experiences of pursuing racial justice and resisting antisemitism. Through these stories, I illustrate some of the points of tension and opportunity at the intersection of antisemitism and racism. When I explore the nuances of navigating this intersection, I find that deeper healing and understanding are necessary for solidarity in liberation movements.

Eric DeMeulenaere, Ph.D.  
First Reader

Laurie Ross, Ph.D.  
Second Reader

“In order to speak to the world what I have heard, I am not bound to step into the street. I may remain standing in the door of my ancestral house. . . .”

– Chaim Potok, *Forward, Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber, p. xv

A rabbi, whose grandfather had been a disciple of the Baal Shem, was asked to tell a story.

“A story,” he said, “must be told in such a way that it constitutes help in itself.”

– Preface, *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber, p. xvii

Scholarship – not as “pure” activity, not as a form of intellectual release, but as the pathway to God – was extraordinarily honored among the Jews.

– *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* – edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, p. 4

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thanks to those in IfNotNow who know that this work of healing, accountability, intersectionality, and action is delicate, deep, and needed. thanks to the movement of IfNotNow for communally channeling our frustration with Jewish institutions that uphold white supremacy and xenophobia. I appreciate the reminder that singing and storytelling are Jewish and can support our calls for justice today. our accomplishments of building clear frameworks to address antisemitism alongside commitments to gender equity, racial justice, decolonization, accessibility, and inclusion have supported me by giving me language to express these struggles. I appreciate knowing that others are also ready to not only engage in these questions, but also act on them by calling for freedom and dignity for all.

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many thanks to the people whose words and experiences I share in these stories. I appreciate their willingness to support my learning in this attempt to liberate ourselves together, recognizing that academic work can feel distant but we can play a role in using its intellectual tools in our visions for justice.

\*I offer acknowledgements, especially in this extensive form, intentionally. This project would not have emerged as cohesively without each of these folks. These acknowledgements also constitute a deliberate practice that I engage with for at least two reasons. First, I want to thank people who made this project possible and meaningful because I am grateful and humbled to receive their support. I ground this practice of gratitude in Jewish traditions of blessings and acknowledgments that our ancestors' work enabled us to be here. Secondly, I name the people who played positive instrumental roles in this project as a way of contextualizing my work in its historical moment – as a decolonial practice. I want to acknowledge not only the family dynamics and survival which brought me here, but also the intellectual work that has come before me and continues to inform our discussions today.

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## Introduction

My mom stretches out her leg and grimaces.

“Is your hip ok?” I ask as she settles into a new position. We’re in the car, stopped at a red light after being on the highway for an hour, and I can see that she’s getting stiff.

“The tension is traveling down to my knee, but it’s ok,” she says, “we’ll be there soon.” Her tone gives away her discomfort, and I remember her arthritis, a pain that has been steadily increasing since my last visit.

I reach over and squeeze her hand. “Does walking or stretching help? Maybe we could walk around the block when we get there.” We’re on our way to my grandparents’, and I’m hoping her pain will ease before we all get engaged in conversation around the kitchen table.

“Definitely,” she replies, her voice a little clearer. “Yoga has been the best. There’s a class I really like on Mondays. The teacher gives us little reminders like to relax our eyebrows, and it makes such a difference. I walk out feeling much lighter.”

“Hmmm,” I muse, wanting to celebrate the relief she finds while my mind jumps to critiques about cultural appropriation. I have heard and discussed arguments against achieving physical health that depends on exploiting other spiritual traditions before, but I want to support my mom’s pursuit of healing.

“I wish you found something that didn’t depend on using someone else’s spiritual tradition like that.”

“What do you mean?” she asks. “I’m not taking the yoga class in order to follow a particular religious path. It simply makes me feel much better.”

“But that’s exactly it!” I say passionately, trying to convey the strength of my thought without offending her. The light turns green and I gather my thoughts as she returns her focus to the road. “Yoga is a tradition based in India that isn’t meant for just physical well-being. Spiritual leaders there were generous when they brought their traditions to this country and began to teach people here. But when people here practice yoga – especially white women when they perpetuate images of being white and thin and fit – it uses this history without acknowledging the source of the wisdom or contributing back with gratitude or exchange.”

I can see my mom thinking. She’s often curious about the way I deconstruct our everyday actions. While I sense that we can make progress, we’re not there yet.

“What does my yoga practice have to do with the spiritual leaders in India, though?” she asks openly.

I take a breath as I gather my thoughts.

“Do you mind if I go on a little tangent that I think might make this clearer?”

“Sure, honey,” my mom says.

Feeling encouraged, I let my thoughts swing from an intellectual point on behalf of others to a personal story that will illustrate my concern in a way my mom can relate to more than the idea of cultural appropriation.

“You know how my friends at school have been pretty supportive of my Shabbat<sup>1</sup> practice?” I begin.

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<sup>1</sup> “Shabbat” is the Hebrew word for “Sabbath.”

“Yeah,” she replies with a smile, “it seems like they’ve been curious and interested, even though they aren’t Jewish.”

“Yes. I have felt that they’ve been interested in a respectful way. I have a story about Daisy<sup>2</sup>, another woman who was my year Clark, who’s good friends with another Jewish woman I know. Last spring, she told me that she was really inspired by the way I observe Shabbat and that she, too, had started leaving her phone off from Friday night to Saturday night. When she told me that she likes having more spontaneous social interactions during this 24-hour period, I got upset. She just used my tradition to benefit her idea of a more fun, adventurous social life!”

I feel myself channeling some of the anger and resentment I still carry. I remember telling her that Shabbat is actually 25 hours long, and that there are many customs that make it Shabbat, not just the act of turning one’s cell phone off.

“So she just took it completely out of context?” my mom asks, picking up on the root of my frustration.

“Yeah! That context is important to us, and so laden with history. When I light the candles on Friday night, I remember lighting them together when I was growing up – those were always special moments to me – and sometimes I also remember how there have been many periods in our history when it has been illegal to observe the holidays, to study our texts. There’s a whole tradition I’m linking myself to when I observe Shabbat, and a tradition that has been threatened many times. I’ve worked hard to cultivate that practice at Clark, even in such a secular environment where it’s not easy and it often means doing so alone. It doesn’t feel fair that she can pick the parts of Shabbat that she likes, call it Shabbat, and benefit from this tradition that is complex, layered with different meanings, struggles, and joys.”

“Ugh,” my mom sighs empathetically. “It sounds like she doesn’t have a frame of reference. Did you tell her all of this?”

“Yes, and I’m not sure if she really understood. She looked at me with a blank expression on her face.” I sigh too, remembering the conversation I had with Daisy and how I didn’t feel that she actually heard me. I make a mental note to find another way to let go of this lingering resentment. Then I bring my thoughts back to the reason I’m telling this story to begin with: yoga.

“You know how I feel hurt by the way Daisy calls her practice Shabbat without really understanding the tradition itself, let alone its history and heritage, and uses it for her own growth?”

“Oh yeah,” my mom says right away.

“That feels appropriative to me, and I think it’s similar with yoga. Of course, there are patterns of Indian spiritual leaders coming to ‘the West’ and sharing their traditions, but yoga today seems so different from that. Do you see what I’m concerned about with the way practicing yoga today in a gym feels disrespectful of its roots, and the people who might persevere through difficult circumstances to uphold their tradition?”

“I see what you mean now,” my mom says thoughtfully, “even though I don’t mean to commit to a particular tradition or path of yoga practice.”

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<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

“That’s still part of it, though,” I reply as we enter the town where my grandparents live. I’m excited that she understands why I’m frustrated that exploitative patterns of appropriation seem normal. “That’s why I don’t want Daisy to say what she’s doing is Shabbat and talk about it publicly unless she converts and commits to everything else about Jewish history, identity, and practice. Along similar lines, unless you’re really committing to the traditions and heritage of yoga, that kind of practice is extractive.” I pause for a moment before I continue.

“There’s a good chance you’re not directly hurting someone when you take yoga classes at the gym,” I say, trying to make a nuanced point about how there are different levels of exploitation, and what my mom is doing is certainly not the harshest form of appropriation.

“Exactly,” my mom says, “it’s an individual thing.”

I nod and start thinking about how I was able to articulate my concern to my mom more easily and deeply by drawing on our shared Jewish heritage. It made so much sense to me to bring in another example of oppression in order to help my mom deepen her understanding. This is a strategy I definitely plan to use in the future. I can picture talking with other Jewish people about the importance of racial justice, and appealing to our sensitivity to oppression because of our collective history of antisemitism as well as the Jewish value of tikkun olam,<sup>3</sup> making the world a better place.

I remember how I developed this sensitivity to cultural appropriation through learning about racial justice. I wonder what it would be like to talk with other racial justice activists about resisting antisemitism. Making that connection for activists who aren’t Jewish so we can all grow and be sensitive to multiple oppressions makes sense to me, but the prospect of sticking up for my Jewish identity and community feels scary, for reasons I later learn to connect with internalized antisemitism.<sup>4</sup>

“That was a cool way to connect frameworks,” I begin talking to my mom again.

I realize that this would be a great time to tell my mom more about what I hope to do in my MA paper.

“I think a lot of these frameworks are connected,” I start vaguely.

“Which frameworks?” my mom asks. “You lost me somewhere.”

“Oh. I’m working on articulating some of the dynamics I’m encountering at the intersection of my Jewish identity and whiteness when I organize for racial justice. There are reasons why some white Jewish people are hesitant to get involved with racial justice, and why Jewish people have often shown up in social justice disproportionately<sup>5</sup> to our worldwide Jewish population,<sup>6</sup> although they have not always done so while being public about their Jewish identities, and both of those trends relate in some ways to antisemitism. There are also particular challenges and insights that we have in racial justice work because of our Judaism. I’d like to write stories about how and when that comes up in my organizing. I think they point toward trends in activism that I want to explore so that we all can deepen our justice and liberation work.”

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<sup>3</sup> “Tikkun olam” literally translates to “fixing the world.” It has multiple origins and uses, ranging from mystical traditions to modern calls for social justice.

<sup>4</sup> Rosenwasser, 2013. ch. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Morales, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, Jewish people constitute approximately 1.8% of the North American population and 0.2% of the world population. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/jews/>

“That sounds great! Thanks for sharing, and explaining about yoga, too. We couldn’t have timed this better!”

We both smile as we turn onto my grandparents’ street.

Pulling into the driveway, my mom turns to me and asks, “When do I get to read it?”

## Praxis Statement

### Background

When I organize for racial justice, I seek to respect the conversation about race, prioritize the urgency of ending racialized violence, interrupting hierarchies, and transforming power dynamics so that people of color can survive and thrive. In these spaces, I learn to be more humble, step back, use my privileges to talk with other white people about white supremacy and ending our participation in it, and support people of color. When I focus on racial justice, I often push through emotional barriers to my participation that have roots in my Jewish identity, such as assumptions that everyone present is Christian, or that everyone's ancestors were colonizers and therefore we have to be ashamed about and apologetic regarding our family's history.

When I am in Jewish communities, that is exactly how it feels – like a community. We share greetings for the holidays, we tell stories to relate lessons from the Bible to our current dreams and struggles, we ask each other about our families and our partners, we sing the songs of our ancestors and I can close my eyes and feel my voice blend with those of old immigrant grandparents and young children in the same moment. I feel the strength and support to raise my voice not only in prayer, but also in the passionate arguments that characterize many settings of Jewish learning – “conflict for the sake of heaven”.<sup>7</sup> I maintain relationships where we may disagree, but our shared values and heritage enable us to continue adding meaning to each other's lives while not reconciling our differences. It was my Jewish studies teachers in high school who showed me that scholars find, complicate, and only occasionally resolve paradoxes all over our tradition. It is from within my Jewish communities that I began to develop this sensitivity to and peace with unanswerable questions.

In some Jewish settings, I meet negative racialized perceptions that white Jewish people have of people of color and their neighborhoods. I see this ignorance as a lack of awareness of the prevalence and extent of racialized violence, rooted in values that have yet to manifest in solidarity. In the moments where I can discuss what I notice with the person, I sometimes use frameworks from other dynamics of unequal power that they can relate to – such as feminism or antisemitism<sup>8</sup> – and then we can see a bit more eye-to-eye.

I am curious about moments when dynamics of racism and antisemitism converge. In dialogues about racial justice, I talk about my whiteness. But to show up fully in my

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<sup>7</sup> In Hebrew, the oft-cited phrase, “*Ishem shamayim*” originally appears in Mishnah Avot 5:17 and continues to inspire respectful, productive debate within Jewish communities today.

<sup>8</sup> I intentionally write “antisemitism” rather than “anti-Semitism” because

“The term “anti-Semitism” was coined in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, an antisemitic spokesman in Germany, to describe the then growing political movement against German Jews. The term is entirely a misnomer, however, since it has nothing to do with Semites. This also explains why we write antisemite as one word. We have adopted the approach of James Parkes, the distinguished Christian historian of antisemitism, to so write antisemitism, as not to convey the misunderstanding that there is a Semitic entity which antisemitism opposes.”

Prager and Telushkin, 1986. second footnote, p. 121

vulnerability in conversations about pain, I cannot ignore the realities and implications of antisemitism. I want to maintain my humility and the importance of centering people of color. I can do that best when I am engaged in processing and healing from the intergenerational trauma that affects me. This healing is a separate but necessary step for me to enact and embody the type of racial justice I believe in. I focus specifically on racial justice as the dynamic in which to include analyses of antisemitism because antisemitism has been a racialized project in the past, not all Jewish people are white, and there are historical connections and tensions between Jewish communities and groups of people of color.

Since I write from my perspective as a white Ashkenazi<sup>9</sup> Jewish woman from the United States, the discourses at those intersections are where I situate my analysis of antisemitism and my perception of racism. I begin from this personal perspective and acknowledge that many Jewish people are people of color and/or have Sephardi or Mizrahi roots,<sup>10</sup> and therefore may have very different experiences with racism and antisemitism. I engage with a particular analysis not to ignore the racial and ethnic diversity within Jewish communities, but rather to be more deeply honest about the roots of my motivations. I also place my analysis within current conversations in the United States – knowing that conversations on similar topics take place in other settings with different histories and circumstances.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Several other theorists have also been curious about Jewish experiences and identity politics. I focus on Jewish people becoming white, a historical phenomenon that directly shapes my experiences, which Karen Brodtkin famously addressed in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> She notes that white Jewish people have often benefited from “relative racial privilege”<sup>12</sup> and situates American Jewish people’s experiences within structures of class and gender in the United States. There are analyses parallel to questions about race, such as questions of colonialism. Those frameworks are slightly different, but reach a similar conclusion: “Global South Jews were co-opted by an imperial design that benefited the North (including its Jewry) to the detriment of the barbaric relationship between local Jewries and the South.”<sup>13</sup>

When I became curious about Judaism in identity politics and current social justice movements, Yotam Marom’s article came out, addressing antisemitism in current times.<sup>14</sup> When I read the exchange with Wendy Elisheva Somerson that followed,<sup>15</sup> I began to see the importance of acknowledging how antisemitism affects different Jewish communities in different ways, separating dynamics within the diaspora as opposed to the State of Israel, and transforming notions of static victimhood into more dynamic and nuanced conceptions of self-identification. As I began to discuss these pieces and the dynamics that I began to notice in my

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<sup>9</sup> A Hebrew term acknowledging that my ancestors are most recently from Eastern Europe.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrew terms for Jewish communities from the Middle East, Spain, and North Africa.

<sup>11</sup> Brodtkin, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Brodtkin, “25 White Jews, Whiteness, and Anti-Semitism.” 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Slabodsky, 2014. p. 3

<sup>14</sup> Marom, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Somerson and Marom, 2016.

life with my Jewish peers, I became increasingly interested in exploring the ways in which antisemitism and racism are linked, and the ways in which antisemitism often prevents Jewish people from contributing more to racial justice work. Some of these obstacles come from collective intergenerational traumas,<sup>16</sup> sometimes also leading to internalized oppression. These topics touch on many dynamics that are beyond the scope of this paper to address. The stories I include here illustrate different circumstances in which several points come alive. Some of my central arguments include:

- appropriation is part of white supremacy in how it demonstrates entitlement to decontextualize and practice aspects of other cultural/religious traditions;
- antisemitism manifests in white supremacy through assimilation and cultural/religious erasure, ignoring people's particular identities and histories and forcing them into different positions;
- analyses of antisemitism are incomplete without talking about the history and modern state of Israel; analyses of Israel and critiques of the Israeli occupation and barriers to Palestinian liberation are incomplete without acknowledging fears of antisemitism. attempts to address one without the other are incomplete and inattentive to root issues

As scholars have noted, “ignoring differences *within* groups contributes to tensions *among* groups [emphasis in original]”.<sup>17</sup> If fellow activists do not acknowledge the Jewish identity as well as the white identity of the white Jewish people who show up for racial justice, it is more likely that both antisemitism and religious/cultural erasure will continue. Therefore, the initiatives of the racial justice group will not be as deep or effective because the Jewish people cannot contribute as much and because the initiative will be reproducing other systems of oppression, thereby weakening its moral grounding as well as efficacy.

As I call on white people to engage in racial justice in order to challenge white supremacy, I suggest that we employ our humility not only in service of racialized trauma, but also in service of an approach of religious equity. In this paper, I will focus on resisting antisemitism in the pursuit of racial justice. A broader framework of religious equity, and initiatives to address power dynamics between religions, would mean that everyone could honestly draw on their sources of spiritual inspiration, connect to their own heritage without imposing on others, and possibly even collectively create language around shared beliefs or communal rituals. When it comes to Judaism specifically and the monotheistic religions more broadly, religious equity means first resisting antisemitism. It also includes healing from antisemitism and cultural and religious erasure, having opportunities to express cultural and religious identities fully, acknowledging and not perpetuating Christian hegemony.<sup>18</sup>

My central argument is about acknowledging intersectionality that activists embody. This is not an excuse to include more white folks, but asserts that using faces of people of color is not sufficient to make an initiative equitable and inclusive. Practices and politics of diversity, representation, and inclusion go deeper. This paper calls on activists not to perpetuate white supremacist religious/cultural/historical erasure, but rather to acknowledge the identities,

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<sup>16</sup> Brown, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Crenshaw, 1991. p. 1242

<sup>18</sup> Kivel, 2013.

histories, and insights and look beyond the surface. I argue that activists interested in intersectional sensitivity ought to consider antisemitism, especially in the light of Christian hegemony, alongside other identities. While intersectionality has often focused on dynamics of race, gender, and class, I advocate for adding many others, notably religion, in order to include marginalized religious groups. Although Judaism initially started as a people and now has cultural components that some Jewish people identify with more than religious elements, I suggest including dynamics of religion and antisemitism in intersectional frameworks.

## Process

The heart of this paper is a set of stories based on my experiences. These experiences and the process of storytelling enable me to theorize. Telling stories, receiving stories, and theorizing enable us to bring directly relevant insights into activism and education, as well as our communities. This process can further enrich settings of racial justice activism.

In the course of writing this paper, I spent a lot of time processing memories and talking with friends, family members, folks I organize with, and fellow Jewish people who are or have been involved in organizing. Talking with other Jewish people who think about race and antisemitism, I saw where some of the trends, concerns, and opportunities are – and I found that there was great potential and deep concern around talking about antisemitism. Some activists – Jewish and gentile – sometimes conflate antisemitism and anti-Zionist or anti-Israel efforts. I see them as interrelated but different, and focus mainly on antisemitism, in order to facilitate deeper analysis, healing, and solidarity work.

As I committed to thinking through these topics, I noticed what came up in my everyday life. I begin my discussion of these topics with some of my experiences. While I have found that these moments both represent aspects of my engagement and point toward larger trends, they often represent only one aspect of the relationships and organizing efforts I mention, they also only reflect a few particular nuances in what I see as broader conversations about racism, antisemitism, intersectionality, and solidarity. The stories I include are those that most vividly encapsulate the questions, tensions and opportunities for deeper understanding in settings that call attention to racism and antisemitism, as I have experienced throughout the course of writing this paper. My interest in pursuing justice at this intersection comes from both my experiences and my values-based concerns about the injustices that I see and hear about. However, I choose to enter the discourse from my own standpoint<sup>19</sup> in order to maintain not a distant humility, but a subjective and engaged sense of nuance, depth, and the range of implications that are involved. I present the stories in an order that builds in increasing intensity: the stories progress from simple conversations with low stakes to those that illustrate a need for deeper transparency and understanding. In the later stories, we call more history into question, and relationships are at stake.

I intend to address activists in my writing, primarily those who are not Jewish, with the hopes of drawing on our common interest in pursuing social justice in order to have deeper conversations about what that looks like to include Jewish identities in our frameworks of

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<sup>19</sup> Harding, Alcoff, and Potter, 1993.

intersectional power analysis. I hope that, by deepening our understanding of antisemitism, we will not only find deeper liberation for Jewish people, but also our organizing will continue to become more sensitive and transformative.

## Methodology

Autoethnography is a tool for scholarly exploration that I use in order to critically unpack my experiences, embrace my subjectivity, and explicitly address topics in a way that can be useful to others. Through the conversations in my stories, I can address histories, pose questions, and suggest possible models for relationally-based organizing. I engage in autoethnography through personal narrative. Carolyn Ellis describes this approach as one in which "social scientists view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative stories" (p. 45). I use these stories to illustrate my experiences in conversation with the theories I have introduced here.

I am using autoethnography for this project because I want to show how these dynamics play out. I live them. I embody both white and Jewish identities, always. There are many ways to frame this project: just as Paulo Freire writes about pursuing humanization beyond dynamics of oppression,<sup>20</sup> I am seeking wholeness<sup>21</sup> and justice.

I use autoethnography for an activist purpose that my religious background also informs. To contextualize and situate my narrative voice, I draw on explanations of traditions of Yiddish storytelling and autoethnography. Both practices inform the content and purpose of my writing.

Yiddish storytelling inspires my narrative voice in a variety of ways:

At its peak, however, Yiddish was neither a folk voice nor a sophisticated "literary" language. It was open at both sides, still responsive to the voice of the folk yet beginning to model itself on literary patterns of the West. The most valuable writing in Yiddish appears at the moment when the two opposing forces, the folk voice and the self-conscious literary, achieve an exquisite, if almost always precarious, balance. [...]

It is almost inevitable that in speaking of Yiddish literature one should refer to an inner dialectic, a tension of counterposed elements: the traditional past and the immediate experience, the religious structure and the secular infiltration, the folk voice and the modern literary accent.<sup>22</sup>

This pattern of brining an inner dialectic into storytelling shaped the way I tell these stories. Yiddish stories are embedded in local political dynamics. Rather than exclusively attempting to entertain readers, they depict characters who try to make sense of their situation while maintaining ethno-religious traditions and roots. Similarly, these reflections highlight moments when I feel tension between my white and Jewish identities. Just as Yiddish writers addressed

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<sup>20</sup> Freire, 1970.

<sup>21</sup> In Hebrew, the words for wholeness (shalem) and peace (shalom) share the same root, indicating their interconnectedness.

<sup>22</sup> *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, p. 28.

the dilemmas that they faced in their stories, so too do I bring my dilemmas into conversation with my history and some dynamics in racial justice activism today.

### The Tip of the Iceberg: The Broader Project

There are a few different ways I conceptualize and maneuver power: I want to give up power from my whiteness, gather power as a feminist, use power to sing the songs and tell the stories of my Jewish heritage, transform how power flows in my family, redistribute power in my organizing, share power with my friends, and build power to construct equitable, consensual practices of collective care in my communities. Yet arriving at these ideals involves me acknowledging anxiety and uncertainty, taking risks in relationships, resisting internalized antisemitism and sexism/patriarchy, etc. – processes that I occasionally make transparent through this paper. Penny Rosenwasser recently articulated many of these processes thoroughly in her book, *Hope into Practice: Jewish Women Choosing Justice Despite Our Fears*. This paper draws on some insights included in her book, and focuses primarily on intersections between Jewish identity and experience and racial justice.

Questions about Jewish people's responses to and engagement with racial justice are not new, but are fraught with complexity regarding antisemitism and racism. One well renowned black feminist, Barbara Smith, said, "Many Jewish women specifically resent that for years, they have talked openly about "confronting" their racism, while with a few noteworthy exceptions black women's anti-Semitism has been largely unmentionable."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, some Jewish people of color<sup>24</sup> see that the many white Jewish people operate in society like other white people "at the top of a racial/social pyramid",<sup>25</sup> not recognizing the salience of race and racism and showing up for racial justice. Cornel West has theorized some of the causes of what he calls black antisemitism. He notes Jewish people's complicity in American racism, black people's sense of feeling betrayal by a fellow oppressed group, and black people's envy and resentment of Jewish people's upward mobility.<sup>26</sup> In this paper, I call attention to some particular challenges at the intersection of antisemitism and racism, acknowledging that there are more perspectives than I can include here, and that this discussion is still ongoing.

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, 1983. p. xlvi.

<sup>24</sup> I use the phrase Jewish people of color as opposed to the more common "Jews of color" because I find the term "Jews" to be reductionist, dehumanizing, and evocative of antisemitic rhetoric. Some Jewish people of color identify as such in Jewish communities but not as people color more broadly, indicating their marginalization particularly within the Jewish community. I use the phrase Jewish people of color to be inclusive.

<sup>25</sup> MaNishtana, 2013. p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> West, 1993. p. 111-113.

## Stories

### Acknowledging Christian Hegemony

It's Sukkot, one of the three main festivals in the ancient Jewish calendar. I'm doing homework because I don't want to fall behind, especially after recently taking time off for the New Year. As I scroll through a dozen new emails, one catches my eye: *Living in the Shadow of the Cross: Understanding and Resisting the Power and Privilege of Christian Hegemony* is available for pickup at the library. One of my professors recommended it to me, upon hearing about my interest in studying Jewish liberation.

I think for a moment. Picking the book up doesn't require an enormous amount of holiday-breaking, and every day with that book will count, so I stop by the library in between meetings. My friend Samuel, who gives me huge hugs and, when we chat on Shabbat, always tells me honestly how he's doing and asks about me – a welcome combination, and a rare one for a male friend – is working at the checkout desk. Although neither of us exchange the traditional greeting for the holiday, we both know that we both know. He retrieves the book for me from the shelf of interlibrary loan items, and as he reads the title and checks it out to me, his eyes widen and he grins. "This title validates so many of my feelings," he says.

"Really?!" I say. I'm not sure what to expect from the book. Now I'm curious what it brings to mind for him.

"Yeah," he says enthusiastically, and goes on to say that the phrase 'Old Testament' is a microaggression<sup>27</sup> because it erases and invalidates the Jewish origins of the Bible and makes it seem archaic in contrast to the New Testament. That's the first time I hear someone questioning the phrase so directly. For the moment, I'm intrigued. I'm not sure if I agree with phrasing it that strongly, but I feel validated in my learning endeavor. As time goes on and I reflect on the history of Christianity, my friend's comment makes more sense to me.

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### Beyond Whiteness: Understanding Where Our Trauma Comes From

A good friend and I are catching up one afternoon just a couple of weeks after Donald Trump won the election.

We talk about the growing possibility of people with undocumented status being forced out of their homes, and I say, "I can't imagine that."

My friend says, "me, neither."

There is a slight pause.

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<sup>27</sup> Chester M. Pierce (1970) coined the term, Derald Wing Sue (2010) uses and builds on it in contemporary settings, and many practitioners and activists continue to use and expand it in various identity politics.

My mind drifts and I picture the Gestapo during the Holocaust, the dreaded knock on the door, the men with black military caps and harsh words.

“Actually,” I say, “I can totally imagine that.”

The moment allowed my friend to think more, too. Now he also has something to say.

“Yeah... my mother dragged us out of the house because of domestic violence.”

For a moment, I’m speechless.

”How old were you?”

“Four.”

So he still remembers. That’s something he still carries with him.

“Damn,” I say, acknowledging his pain, offering a brief comment to give him an opportunity to end the conversation.

We both laugh lightly for a brief moment – not because it’s funny but for the emotional release – and it strikes me how pervasive and limiting our focus on white privilege had been at the start of the conversation. Beneath that overgeneralization, that our position as white people in society kept us distant from a lot of violence, was a history of another manifestation of oppression – for him, gendered and personal; for me, cultural/religious – of trauma that we could do well to learn and heal from. We could learn and heal from such traumas, not to escape our complicity or responsibility in whiteness, but to be stronger advocates for liberation, and more empathetic allies, and more liberated individuals.

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### Finding Silence When I Began to Seek Solidarity

I participate in a weekend-long training with IfNotNow, a current social movement to end American Jewish support for the Israeli occupation, support Palestinian liberation, and transform American Jewish communities. It’s a social justice organizing training that includes an analysis of antisemitism. The analysis is deep, honest, emotional, and personal. It’s the first time I realize that there is a reason my worries can get so deep. It’s the first time I can conceptualize the broad context to feeling isolated as a Jewish person and understand reasons we look for each other wherever we go. It’s the first time I see the ways that many of the traditions I hold close have not only been under threat in past regimes, but have also helped us survive as a people. These realizations are painful and connected to a violent history that I grew up learning about. Placing the frameworks in current times gives my perspective much clarity and renewed relevance.

I come back with a few ounces of courage to speak with a couple of close friends more openly about these patterns that I’m noticing. These close friends are people of color, and I hesitate to take up space talking about the oppression that I face or trauma I carry from past generations from my heritage and antisemitism with them because I don’t want to discount their struggle with racist violence. But the president-elect in this country has nominated a man who is not only openly white supremacist but also antisemitic, to be the chief strategist, and I’m beginning to realize that if shit hits the fan, I will need allies. G-d forbid my people will face

widespread life-threatening violence again, beyond the hate speech and structural discrimination we can survive through... I realize that I want at least my closest friends to understand why I worry about my people. And why my worries for them can be so intense. I also realize that this source of pain, which I haven't mentioned to them before, is actually an important aspect of my identity worth sharing with them.

So when two friends come over for lunch and we catch up about our weekends, I start to tell them not only about IfNotNow, but also a bit about the trends I'm beginning to connect in my head from the history I've learned about my people to the frameworks of systems of oppression that we use in our organizing. I speak about intergenerational trauma and patterns that don't serve us much anymore, such as worrying and living in insular communities. They listen intently. One friend says, "that's interesting."

Neither ask me questions.

Someone shifts the topic and our conversation continues.

When I see another close friend later in the day and she asks me excitedly how the training went, I give her an overview. I tell a simplified version of my experience in order to gauge her level of interest. I think of the phrase "tone policing" and try to be as honest as I can about my experience without saying more than I think she can hear and support.

This friend, too, listens and says little.

In the coming days, time is the only distance between me and this training I attended. The concepts tumble around in my head – isolation; fear of annihilation; being put in between the people in power and the working class; some Jewish people who became white in the US internalized messages that they would be safe within white supremacy; we were taught not to stand up for ourselves; on and on they go.

I think of how antisemitism has often manifested in structural forms of exploitation. How can I explain to my friends that my class background comes from my family's immigration story and is now a privilege that enables me to engage politically and heal emotionally? How can I tell them that it is my strong Jewish upbringing and education that enables me to resist assimilating further, that gives me the strength to organize on their behalf for racial justice? How can I tell my friends that antisemitic microaggressions I hear mainly manifest in religiously insensitive remarks, but there are others that are far worse, and that the issue is not only insensitivity, but also the pervasiveness of Christian hegemony that continues to shape – and limit – my experiences?

I think of times when I speak with friends of color about their pain from racism. One practice I've picked up is waiting until they end the conversation. From when they start telling a story or expressing anger, frustration, or another form of pain, I try to listen carefully and affirm their feelings and the injustice of racism. I alternate between offering simple but powerful validations – trying not to take up space in the conversation but rather support them as they speak their truth. I ask questions about poignant moments so that they can release the hold that this pain may have on them, and so I can understand better. In the face of my friends' silences when that kind of support and encouragement would have meant a lot to me, I feel the distances between us, in our different positions of pain. I remember learning that silence often implies or leads to complicity with oppression, and I feel sad. I feel a little isolated. Part of me also feels recommitted to being there for them.

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## Questions of Exile, Diaspora, and Israel Follow Me Everywhere

My friend and I are sitting at computers in the library. I take a break from reading an article and I look over at her beside me. She looks up too, with a distressed expression that I can't read fully. I ask how she's doing and what's coming up for her in her work. She's working on her research project on the impact of extractive industries on indigenous women in Latin America. She takes the headphones off completely and begins telling me that a transnational mine is going to force this group of people off of their land. I realize that she's very upset. "Do you want to walk home together?" I suggest. We stop our conversation in order to log off of the computers, pack up our books, and walk through the library together.

As we fall into step next to each other on the sidewalk, my friend returns to the conversation. She says she doubts this group will ever be able to return to their land. The multinational corporations will take their land and will use it for mining. The people will struggle to continue their indigenous traditions because their children will have to learn Spanish and will probably not be able to farm on their ancestral land anymore. My friend is upset but articulate: she integrates information with her critical analysis of these neoliberal exploits.

I think about a class I took about migration and how people rebuild a sense of home in exile. When I took that class, I brought my Jewish identity into a college classroom for the first time, considering how my ancestors survived and adapted so many times throughout different temporary homes in the diaspora. I think about how my tradition has changed, how I can't even long for how it was originally when my ancestors were indigenous, when we farmed land where we also had full political, economic, cultural, and religious rights.

I think of how, when I observe the traditions of my people, I sometimes remember that it has not always been legal for us to engage in our Jewish practices. I sometimes feel overwhelmed with gratitude that, for most of my life, I have not feared violence when celebrating a holiday. I think of how, when I study my traditions with teachers, mentors, peers, and members of my communities, we have customs for learning texts. We value multiple opinions. We see paradoxes and sometimes don't resolve them. We argue passionately and respectfully, with reverence for our ancestors and creator, 'for the sake of heaven.' But we weren't always so text-based. We used to be a place-based people. That is, before our first exile 2500 years ago.

My friend has finished a thought and stops talking. Usually, when we talk about her research, I ask questions. As someone distant from the issue, as her friend, and as someone with similar values and politics, I try to support her in this work. I acknowledge that it's violent, echo that the multi-national corporations are greedy and capitalistic, and affirm her efforts to amplify the indigenous folks' voices.

This time, I have something to say.

"It sounds like they'll be forced to leave," I start cautiously. "Then they'll probably come up with ways to pass on their language, traditions, and farming practices. There are so many

peoples who have been forced into exile over the years. It's awful that those dynamics are still going on, but hopefully they'll survive."

"I never thought of it that way, with a framework about exile," she says.

"I know," I say softly. "It's something I think of because that's what my people went through a long time ago – they were kicked out – and have been since, many times, for being Jewish."

My thoughts keep going, about how much our tradition has changed, from an oral one based on story-telling to a written one based on texts and group study; about how much we've lost and the ways I both resent assimilation and realize it is a fact of my life and challenging pattern in many eras of Jewish history.

But we are talking about her research, and I want to respect the current violence. I attempt to make one detailed point and then bring it back.

"Judaism used to be an oral tradition," I explain, "until people in power targeted the scholars and people were afraid that traditions would be lost with them unless they wrote them down." I take a breath before continuing. "But it sucks that the violence keeps going on like this today."

"I'm not sure they're comparable," she begins. She speaks carefully too. "People are not exactly targeted in this community because they belong to that community and because they are indigenous. The issue is because of the resources underneath. The corporations get away with it and this exploitation is possible because the people are at the lowest ladder in society. But they're not specifically targeted because of their identity."

"Oh yeah," I say, my gaze drifting. I realize we've gotten to my house already – hers is one block farther – and we've stopped walking. But this distinction that she's made sounds accurate to me, and brings up a kind of pain in me that I haven't felt often. It mostly manifests in me as fear, that people could come after me any time because I am Jewish, because they have so many times in history and who would stop them.

More emotion is coming through my voice, and I speak honestly. "That's part of why being in Israel was so meaningful to Jewish people in the late 1800s and early 1900s – it wasn't just anywhere, but it was a return."

"But it was so fucked up," she says.

"No," I say directly. I rarely say no like that, with such conviction in my voice. But I've been thinking about this for years and now it all makes sense.

"It is not fucked up that they wanted to return to what they saw as their ancestral spiritual and cultural homeland. What is fucked up is the way that that happened, when that took place at the expense of other people's lives and livelihoods."

Now it's my friend's turn to take a deep breath. I can imagine her thoughts: details and perhaps all sorts of replies from her time as an activist for Palestinian liberation, concerns about offending me as a Jewish person as well as activist for many sets of liberation. "I think there's more I would have to think through about that, and I don't know if I could respond right now," she eventually says.

"Sure," I say, realizing that we're standing outside of my house and we both have other responsibilities to fulfill. I also realize that something major just shifted in the conversation. It was a huge click for me, though, and I want to continue to share that with her. Plus, I think that these frameworks of exile, cultural survival, and ethnic maintenance would be enriching for her

research and for those indigenous communities. “Let’s definitely come back to it another day soon.”

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### Solidarity between Black and Jewish People and its Echoes from History

On a sunny January day, I visit my grandparents, who still live in the house where they raised my mom and aunt. From the moment I enter the house and inhale the scents that have enveloped me from my childhood, I feel energized. I have come to explore memories from my grandparents’ lives. I have come to revisit my childhood. I have come to ask questions and reflect on values that shape the decisions I make in my own life about how to honor my family and my heritage when I walk out of the door. Each room or corner has its own scent, ranging from musty books to fresh cooking and my grandmother’s perfume. To anyone else, I can imagine the combination of scents seeming odd, but to me, it feels like home, and part of me relaxes right away.

As the afternoon progresses, my grandmother and I venture into the kitchen and make dinner together. Much of my cooking knowledge comes from her, and it’s great to be back beside her again, making zucchini casserole. When it comes out of the oven, my grandfather joins us and we sit down to eat together.

Over dinner, my grandparents tell story after story. My grandmother’s father and his family moved to the U.S. in 1917 from Austria, where they faced antisemitism. My grandparents met on a blind date. One of their relatives changed his name from Hymie to William Howard, which sounded less Jewish, in order to get into dental school.

My grandparents are full of stories. They go back and forth, reminiscing, filling in each other’s details, teaching me. We take turns listening, asking questions, pausing after sad stories, and laughing at the silly ones or at the ways my grandparents tell them. We sit together and talk long after we finish eating, until our souls feel nourished, too.

Once we wash the dishes and just a few remain drying on the counter, I decide to check my phone to see if anybody needs me. It links me to my life beyond my grandparents’ home, reminding me of my emerging adulthood beyond their world and symbolizing the bridges I crossed to enter the moments we shared over dinner. I have many text messages. First, I read one from my closest friend:

*Devra, Jewish people are trying to take over New York. They are like everywhere and are kicking out black people and that really frustrates me cause we have so much history here*

I sigh, suddenly a bit weary. The way she has phrased her concern makes me think of the antisemitic stereotypes of Jewish people trying to control economies and societies<sup>28</sup>. The images of New York City remind me of Jewish enclaves that are much more conservative than

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<sup>28</sup> the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

my religious and political views, and I have strong mixed feelings about how I feel they don't represent me. The reference to history reminds me of the history of Jewish immigrants coming to this country through New York, of Jacob Riis's photographs and the stories of my community that I learned when I was younger.

But I'm becoming more familiar with her frustration, built up after so many years of racist oppression in so many different forms in this country. I remember learning about issues with real estate where Jewish people have been landlords, placed in between working class or lower income black folks and white supremacist leaders. Since Jewish people benefited from the GI Bill, this is a structural difference of access to resources. The dynamic between Jewish landlords and black tenants replicates antisemitic structures from medieval Europe, when larger political leaders put Jewish people in intermediary positions in order to suppress dissent and rebellion. I know I'll have to think hard about how to reply because I want to honor both of our experiences. I realize I've seen this moment coming, not necessarily with Alison in particular, but a clash between my commitment to racial justice and feeling the legacies of antisemitism within me. I don't want to make oversimplified comparisons or say that our oppressions are equal – I know that's insensitive and black people have been upset at Jewish people for doing that in the past.<sup>29</sup> Now I want to figure this out because I really value our friendship. I'm a bit shocked about how direct this conversation is starting, though, and I realize I don't know much in detail about the history of New York.

I go back to the list of new text messages and open up one from a local leader in IfNotNow, the movement I've joined to end the American Jewish support for the Israeli occupation.

*Hey Devra! it's Miriam from IfNotNow. I just left you a voicemail about the next Hive Meeting on Thursday... Can you be there?! I imagine it's too much of a schlep, but just in case: It's this Thursday, Jan 5 at 6:30 at the Arlington St Church. I would be awesome to have you there – we'll be connecting with the new people who joined us in the past couple trainings and planning for what's next! Let me know :) Hope you're enjoying the winter holidays!*

This message washes over me like a wave in the ocean that feels warmer than I might expect. I remember one of our movement principles, "we show up for ourselves and each other."<sup>30</sup> I suddenly feel supported in my endeavor to maintain my friendships, pursue racial justice and Palestinian and Jewish liberation, and actively love my grandparents. Miriam's message makes me feel grounded in my heritage, a heritage that is shifting and courageously standing for radical politics in our movement. The way she uses the Yiddish word "schlep" may seem mainstream to some, but is deeply evocative of my family's background, and to me, it symbolizes my goal to honor my grandparents and my friends, my tradition and my politics,<sup>31</sup> a goal that I share with others in IfNotNow.

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<sup>29</sup> Baldwin, 1967.

<sup>30</sup> <https://ifnotnowmovement.org/about-us/our-principles/>

<sup>31</sup> As the Boston Workmen's Circle, an organization celebrating and supporting Jewish culture and social justice, states on their website, "Yiddish was the language of 2.5 million Eastern European Jewish immigrants, of the Jewish labor movement and the struggle for rights, equality, and freedom." (<http://circleboston.org/yiddishkayt>)

I don't reply to either message yet. I'm at my grandparents' house in order to soak up their stories and spend time together. We only get to spend multiple days in a row together like this a couple of times a year. They miss me when I'm at school, and I need their support. With just a drop less energy, I rejoin them for some reflection as we wind down the evening.

My grandmother is already getting into bed, so I tuck her in as we talk about how wonderful it feels to be together. I say goodnight and leave with a full heart. Soon, I will rejoin my grandfather in the den, where I know he will be watching the news or a taped lecture that he has found and is eager to discuss. He is always ready for a political or intellectual discussion with me. It is to him and my mom that I trace my comfort with honest, direct communication, such as my friend Alison is calling for. If I frame the communication style in terms of my culture or tradition, I think about Jewish practices of studying Talmud and other sacred texts, where arguing "for the sake of heaven"<sup>32</sup> can be as joyous as it is challenging. In the Jewish spaces I grew up in, we disagreed with each other respectfully across age and status, and celebrated the healthy debate, so long as we adhered to the other Jewish value not to embarrass anyone. I smile to myself as I think of heading toward the den and what questions my grandfather will start our conversation with; even though it's getting late, this is the kind of conversation we can have at any hour of the day.

Before going to see my grandfather, I decide to stop by my room – my aunt's – and pull my phone out again. I think about Alison. I can hear her voice in my mind, clear and serious. We're close, and I have to be honest. I feel the need to tell her about how her phrasing sounds to me – the "taking over, "everywhere," and "kicking out black people" hurt – but I also have to be sensitive to her pain. There is a reality that Jewish people benefited from the GI Bill before black people could, and there have historically been some tensions between Jewish landlords and black tenants. Alison and I are direct when we talk, so I know I have to address both of our histories explicitly when I text her back. The message I send feels overly thought-out and qualified, but I send it because it's late and I need to say something.

*Hey Alison. I hear what you're saying, especially that there's a racist element that threatens some black people's histories. Saying that Jewish people are trying to take over echoes antisemitism, erases the Jewish histories, and forgets that white supremacy is often underlying these issues. Let's talk more in person?*

and when I see her message,

*This makes me sad*

I exhale slowly, this time reassured by our emotional connection beyond our separate identities. I wish I could hug her.

Alison has brought me back to a sense of our common humanity. After prioritizing racial justice for a while, and now visiting my grandparents in a setting full of family history and love, I can see clearly how the two text messages highlight both my passion for justice and my

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<sup>32</sup> In Hebrew, the oft-cited phrase, "lshem shamayim" originally appears in Mishnah Avot 5:17 and continues to inspire respectful, productive debate within Jewish communities today.

sensitivity to the different manifestations of antisemitism that my people have faced. The two sets of feelings seem so central to my existence, and I'm glad I could address both in one day.

Feeling drained but at peace, I turn my phone off and walk down the hall to join my grandfather.

## Conclusions

This analysis pushes toward acknowledgment of each set of identity politics, not using one to ignore another. I see dismantling white supremacy and antisemitism as complementary projects of liberation, and this paper highlights some of the moments where these projects converge. I argue that while we pursue healing and activism in one area, we should be careful not to perpetuate other hierarchies at the same time. In these stories, I focus on moments when racism and antisemitism seem especially relevant. Some scholars say that we are white but Jewish, implying that we are not fully white or associated with white supremacists, or that somehow the antisemitism we face is strong enough to negate any complicity we oppression that we may be responsible for. However, I assert a politics of being white and Jewish, where I have a strong sense of my heritage and acknowledge ways I benefit from some systems of unequal power and oppression. Since Jewish people have not always been white, I acknowledge whiteness and Jewish identity as different dynamics. This approach manifests in both how I discuss being in an oppressor role and how I discuss being in an oppressed position.

I also show several other points, directly and indirectly, which illustrate the settings in which I see these changes taking place. In my opening story, I show how family is a focal point of Jewish life and culture, playing a central role today in both ethnic maintenance and healing. My peers and I who are third generation American Jewish people have the opportunity to move beyond pressing needs for physical survival into the realm of politics and emotional well-being. The stories with my friends show that discussions about identity politics as well as social justice movements influence the ways we exchange support in our lives as people as well as activists. As I show in several stories, I notice that I can both listen more deeply and speak more transparently when I am rooted in my Jewish identity and values. These stories trace some of my journeys as I attend to dynamics of racism and antisemitism in my family and friendships with fellow activists and demonstrate the ways I navigate my politics.

Some stories show some complicity in racism that white Jewish communities are responsible for contributing to, ranging from cultural appropriation through yoga to gentrification in New York City. These narratives further complicate such patterns by acknowledging the ways that cultural appropriation can be very distant and limited in the destruction that it causes, and the Jewish immigration history that sometimes predates racist housing policies. Since these stories unfold in the United States and do not explicitly acknowledge the history of settler colonialism on this land, nor directly engage in some kind of restorative justice with those native communities, they risks further normalizing such exploitation. I draw attention to that power dynamic here because not only is it of historical importance, but also because the pattern continues: while I generally enjoy full benefits of citizenship, the United States legal system still does not fully protect many Native Americans.

I interpret my friends' silences as hesitation to deal with antisemitism – to listen to more details, to acknowledge their complicity, or even to adopt a clear stance of being in solidarity. Relative to identities that are more visibly oppressed, such as race and gender, I face few microaggressions because of my Jewish identity. My pain is tied up in a long history of antisemitism, including the Crusades, expulsions, the Holocaust, and other patterns that put Jewish people in between the ruling class and other oppressed groups. Antisemitic patterns are often invisible because of the ways they allow Jewish people limited success and the fact that

antisemitism is cyclical, and is not over even when it looks like Jewish communities are assimilated and successful.<sup>33</sup> I notice these patterns, and comments and current events remind me of this history and scare me. Conversations with friends of color can be challenging because I see them focusing on racialized oppression that is physically violent and directly exclusionary as well as structural, rather than the long-term, ethno-religious, structural, and insidious patterns that I struggle against. The stories with my friends of color highlight moments when I break the silence around antisemitism and begin to name and describe this oppressive dynamic that impacts my life. Naming antisemitism and being more transparent about my tradition is also one of the ways I resist assimilation, which I see as an aspect of white supremacy. I name antisemitism and bring frameworks of analyzing it into these conversations not only for the sake of Jewish liberation, but also to dismantle all systems of oppression. Frameworks that originate in dynamics of antisemitism, such as diaspora, can also be useful to other groups facing oppression.

While Critical Race Theory explicitly suggests or implicitly implies that it is working to dismantle all oppressions,<sup>34</sup> these stories illustrate ways in which people who often use a critical race approach to their organizing are unaware of how antisemitism manifests in society. This gap demonstrates that we all have more to learn in order to engage fully in dismantling multiple forms of oppression. The power of erasure comes from white supremacy. Working to dismantle white supremacy means making the oppression that multiple groups have faced visible, not just black people or Latinx people, even – and especially – while we organize for justice. As I demonstrate in the story about discussing dynamics of exile and diaspora with my friend, I see discussions of the formation of the State of Israel as incomplete without the history of antisemitism. Acknowledgement of antisemitism both strengthens critiques of the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinians and enables solidarity as Jewish people and Palestinian people pursue their liberation together.

Such learning, inquiring, reflecting, and sharing can fuel our confidence and our organizing, strengthen our relationships, and ultimately lead to liberation for more people. Although questions of solidarity may arise when people have different needs, and particular approaches and paths of resistance may differ, we can address common goals and concerns in order to theorize problems together and support each other in complementary solutions as we push for liberation.

## Implications

If activists are more explicit about acknowledging more identity politics, more communities will feel included and welcomed in liberation movements. When settings of social justice organizing can affirm all actions for the sake of liberation, acknowledge the courage and strength that requires, and address urgently violent issues without making comparison that put down other struggles, activists can support each other better. Similarly, I suggest that more Jewish activists will enter and stay in secular movements if people address antisemitism. I see

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<sup>33</sup> Rosenblum, 2007. p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Matsuda, 1993. p. 6.

this type of nuanced acknowledgement of multiple dynamics of identity politics, in which I sometimes fall in an oppressor group and sometimes fall in an oppressed group, as an important part of working toward interconnected, collective liberation for multiple groups. There are many ways to act on this intersectional awareness. As I illustrate in the story with my mom, some of the most influential conversations and deepest changes can take place when we engage within trusting relationships and across difference in order to build deeper understanding. This understanding is possible when we focus on what unites us, are willing to acknowledge our complicity with some forms of injustice, and trust each other to grow into more complete understandings of power dynamics. Personal understanding of these systems of oppression is a key step in building a more conscious community. Communal understanding of these systems of oppression can be instrumental in intergroup organizing. This approach also highlights the effectiveness of starting where we are, doing our activist work at home with those we already know, and bringing our communities and ourselves into liberation work. I see that grounding in our own heritage and in-group healing can strengthen us as organizers, facilitators, allies, friends, and people. We can choose to build relationships of solidarity and exploring these issues, rather than distance and ignoring our differences. When we make space for activists with lingering effects of trauma to contribute despite their limitations, our activism can be more inclusive, revolutionary, and transformative.

I also have direct recommendations for those from a Christian heritage, especially those who are organizing for social justice in multicultural communities:

- don't assume everyone is Christian or is ok with a Christian-centered calendar or worldview, don't say "religious" when you mean "Christian";
- understand the role Christianity played in colonialism and how colonialism spread antisemitism as well as other ways of devaluing many cultural, religious, and/or spiritual traditions;
- understand that not all Jewish people have class privilege. assuming so, and linking Judaism with wealth, is an inaccurate generalization that replicates and perpetuates antisemitic stereotypes;
- when focusing on race in social justice organizing, focus on race. when valuing intersectionality, be open to including religion or any other identity within which people experience oppression, even if it seems historical and irrelevant.

Since these processes of working toward liberation are complex and take much effort and time to bear fruit, I find that patience, trust, commitment, and perseverance can enable lasting change. I have learned in Jewish learning contexts to value questions and the process of learning along with the resulting decision for communal practice, leave some paradoxes unresolved, and honor our history while working for a better future. I think that activists could gain insight from lingering in moments of discomfort and uncertainty in the process of pursuing justice.

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