



‘We simply feel forgotten about:’ 9 Asian American Jews speak

Talya Zax and Zachariah Sippy March 20, 2021

The United States is in the middle of a devastating spike in hate crimes against Asian-Americans, with nearly 3,800 incidents of hate reported to the organization Stop AAPI Hate in the last year. (AAPI refers to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.) Between broad under-reporting of hate crimes against Asian Americans and the lack of a centralized government system for collecting such reports, authorities believe the 3,800 reported incidents to represent a fraction of actual number of acts of hate against Asian Americans in the last year, and a marked escalation from years past.

The tragic shooting of eight people, including six Asian women, by a white man in Atlanta on Tuesday brought new national attention to the seriousness of this moment. And this weekend marks the 79th anniversary of Congress’s enactment of the WWII executive order establishing the process of Japanese internment, a crucial reminder that anti-Asian racism in this country is a persistent problem that has manifested time and again, to devastating effect.

In partnership with Rabbi Mira Rivera of Romemu in New York, N.Y., we’ve asked nine Asian American Jewish leaders to share their experiences in this painful time, as well as thoughts on how American

Jews can and should offer support to the Asian American community. Their responses, which have been edited for length and clarity, are below.



Rabbi Mira Rivera, Romemu, New York, N.Y.:

Rabbi Mira Rivera

Weary colleagues in Jewish community ask if they really have to champion everyone under attack.

They say, “We have been asked to show up for black and brown communities, and now

Asians too?”

Selective silence is loud.

We too are weary, those of us who have Asian heritage woven into our Jewish identities. We show up and say the same tefillot: “Shelter us in your embrace of peace,” “Rescue us from the hand of every foe, ambush along the way, and from all manner of punishments that assemble to come to earth.” Those prayers hammer on the tender gold of our bodies, and on the menorah of the Judaism that we hold to so dearly.

The Rabbis taught that “One supports the poor of the gentiles as one does the poor of Israel... One comforts the mourners among the gentiles as one does those in Israel.”

To my weary colleagues who ask if they really have to champion Asian Americans who are under attack in this ongoing anti-immigrant hostility in our country, the answer is yes.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, Central Synagogue, New York, N.Y.:

In 2003, I contributed a story to Sh'ma Journal's issue on “Jewish diversity:”

One year my mother put kimchee, a spicy, pickled cabbage condiment, on our Seder plate. My Korean mother thought it was a reasonable substitution since both kimchee and horseradish elicit a similar sting in the

mouth, the same clearing of the nostrils. She also liked kimchee on gefilte fish and matzo. ‘Kimchee just like maror, but better,’ she said. I resigned myself to the fact that we were never going to be a ‘normal’ Jewish family.

Since that time, the article has made its way into day school and college curricula. People still quote it back to me. There were very few writings on “Jewish diversity” back then. A lot has changed in the 18 years since. Now, this short reflection joins a roundtable of amazing Asian Jewish leaders’ voices. And in the last year I have been heartened by growing recognition of so many Jews of Color within the American Jewish community, estimated to be as high at 12-15%, or about 1 million Jews strong.

Rabbi Angela W. Buchdahl

I guess my Jewish family was more “normal” than I thought.

But I have also changed. In the last year I have become more aware of the underlying forces that have continued to oppress Black, Brown, Asian, Hispanic and indigneous people in our country. In the wake of the recent surge in anti-Asian violence, with the devastating shootings in Atlanta, I was further cracked open.



I now fear for my strong but tiny Korean mother when she goes out for a walk alone. I look back at the indignities, condescension and discrimination that have been a part of her daily life as an immigrant, and I realize that my mother too, lived in a narrow place — her *mitzrayim*. Her bitterness just tasted different than mine.

So this year, for the first time since childhood, I will be putting kimchee back on my seder plate. Because as long as my mother is still in a kind of Egypt, I am, too.

The greatest religious mandate of this holiday is to remember, in every generation, what it feels like to be a stranger. And the force of that memory commands empathy and even love for the stranger, for we know the soul of a stranger.

We left Egypt an *erev rav* — a “mixed multitude.” The motley band who fled was a diverse group, joined not by one color, but one dream: liberation. We remain a mixed multitude today, and we know the promise of redemption must be for everyone.

Becky Jaye, Rabbinical Student at Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion:



Becky Jaye

“O Source of mercy, give us the grace to show forbearance to those who offend against us. When the wrongs and injustices of others wound us, may our hearts not despair of human good. May no trial, however severe, embitter our souls and destroy our trust.”

I read these words from the Kol Nidre service shortly after learning of the murders in Atlanta. However, it was not only the perpetrator of these horrendous crimes who came to mind when I read them with a heavy heart.

“To those who offend against us.”

With deep regret, the first to come to mind when I uttered these words between tears, were the white Jews whom I call my fellow community members.

My friends. People whom I care about. People whom I love.

A rabbinic mentor of mine recently reminded me that ironically, silence can be loud. When white Jews ask me how they can be better allies, I ask them to listen. Most frequently, I ask them to listen to the words of their community members of color. To hold them. To resist the inclination to deny or defy truth.

Now, to my white Jewish colleagues, classmates and mentors, I ask you to listen again. Listen to the silence that emerges from yourselves. Listen to

the silence that provides you the luxury of comfort and safety. Listen to the ways in which it causes others pain. Listen to the ways it costs human life.

Yoshi Silverstein, Founder and Executive Director, Mitsui Collective:

Yoshi Silverstein

Jews of all backgrounds are all too familiar with the rapid growth of a conflagration sparked by violent rhetoric and scapegoating by those in power, set against a backdrop of desperation and anger.

As I write this the day after the Atlanta massacre of Asian women, today for me feels exactly how the day after the Tree of Life massacre felt. Exactly the same. It is visceral. It is personal. It is heartbreaking.



This is at once a threat to ourselves and a threat to all those with whom our liberation is bound together. We will not stand for attacks on our capitol, nor can we stand for attacks on our citizens — or any who are a part of our communities.

The Jewish community must stand tall and proud in solidarity with Asian American communities everywhere, and with meaningful recognition of those in our own community who are both Asian and Jewish. The identities, voices and work of Asian Jews must be elevated to more than just a footnote.

Korean American (Oscar nominated!) actor Steven Yeun [said](#) it brilliantly: “Sometimes I wonder if the Asian-American experience is what it’s like when you’re thinking about everyone else, but nobody else is thinking about you.”

All too often, we simply feel forgotten about. Sometimes reckoning with bias just means remembering to ask someone how they’re doing. It means

checking in with the people in your community. And if you don't know who those people are ... well, that's a good place to start.

At the same time, white folks and Asian folks and those of all backgrounds must push back against white supremacist rhetoric meant to drive further division between oppressed communities, especially those pushing anti-Black narratives. My Black Jewish friends were amongst the very first to reach out in support the morning after Atlanta. We create safety through building relationships, through igniting and nurturing the drive towards collective obligation, partnership and coalition-building. We need to have each other's backs.

In the words of the Passover Haggadah, "We were slaves in Egypt ... now we are free. Today we are enslaved; next year may we be free."



Kohenet Keshira haLev Fife, Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute and Kesher Pittsburgh:

Keshira haLev Fife

By noon on the day after the Atlanta shooting, my inbox was flooded with messages of care and support, not unlike the last time a white man killed people like me.

I thought about how the wider Pittsburgh community held the Jewish community in the days following the Tree of Life massacre on Oct. 27, 2018, and I began to wonder whether the people of Atlanta were circling around their Asian and Asian-American community, offering care, support and solidarity.

A humble plea: when confronted with a situation where Asian and Asian-American people are at risk of harm or violence, please protect and defend us. Equally important, when you witness subtle racism, micro-aggressions or ridicule, intervene. Please make it a habit to interrupt harm where you see it, even if it means entering into an uncomfortable conversation.

My hope is that readers might allow compassion and humanity to dictate that Asian and Asian-American people need not carry the burden of this oppression alone. Many caring hands not only ease the load, but have a better chance at dismantling the systems that created the burden of oppression in the first place.

As we move toward the season of our liberation, Jewish people return to the story of escape from bondage, remembering it as though we were there. Though the common reason given is that it helps us to appreciate our own freedom, I subscribe to the idea that it also reminds us that our liberation was collective, and that it remains so today.

Said another way: none of us are free unless all of us are free.

Arielle Korman, Co-founder and Executive Director of Ammud: the Jews of Color Torah Academy:

Arielle Korman

Violence against Asian people is tied up in histories of colonialism, imperialism and the conquering of so-called “exotic” lands and bodies. One wish I have is for the non-AAPI community to join in the burden of learning that history, and of learning why fetishization does not lead to safety. In this particular moment, if you are looking for action, look for local AAPI-led initiatives that uplift the most vulnerable — low-income folks, sex workers, women and other gender-marginalized people.



If you are a white Jew who has been disturbed by violent antisemitism in recent years, understand how when one holds multiple identities related to communities under attack, the feelings can compound.

After I led High Holiday services for several hundred people, pouring my heart and soul into the prayer, cradling each Hebrew and Aramaic word with intention and care, a congregant half-yelled at me, “how come you look so exotic!?” To me, the first step is really acknowledging that racism

against AAPI folks really does exist, and the word “exotic,” whether spoken or implied, is never a compliment.

An example: I love Rachel Bloom, the creator of the TV series “Crazy-Ex-Girlfriend,” and I also often show people her video “Chanukah Honey,” a parody of “Santa Baby” to illustrate a point. In it, Bloom’s character is a white Jewish woman whose Jewish male love interest’s “last three girlfriends were Japanese.” “I’m exotic too,” she sings, as though “exotic” were the goal, the key to attraction. There’s some truth to this stereotype of white Ashkenazi men dating Asian women, and the feelings that reverberate in the Jewish community about this dynamic deserve examination.

The song is comedy, but there’s something very real here. Fetishization of Asian women and the devaluing of features often associated with Ashkenazi-ness are both harmful and damaging. Our liberation is bound up with one another’s.



Janu Mendel, Executive Director, Repair the World Miami:

Janu Mendel

I’ve heard many Asian Jews share stories about noticing the conspicuous absence of the wider Jewish community when it comes to this issue, and that speaks volumes.

The non-Asian Jewish community should heed calls for solidarity, ranging from public statements to personal reachouts to Asian Jews, and making good on communal relationships with the wider local Asian-American community. If there is a rally: show up.

Support is most effective through action, and not just from a distance. If you’ve used the term “Jews of Color” in any of your “inclusivity discussions” in the past year, this is an opportunity for you to show that there is action behind your words. To paraphrase a tangible call to action inspired by Bekkah Sharf, a volunteer with social justice agency Bend the Arc in the Bay Area, you should volunteer with initiatives intended to keep our community

safer. You should donate to organizations providing services to meet immediate needs. You should mobilize your communities to view this work as important, so they can do the same.

For white Jews to reckon with this, they must reckon with white supremacy and all of its implications. Our community already has an effective blueprint to follow in how we combat antisemitism. We have done this so well, for so long, that it's now almost second nature. There are agencies and education campaigns and task forces and every creative idea one can imagine. The goal should be to keep up that same energy when it comes to recognizing, calling out and refusing to allow for anti-Asian biases wherever they are apparent.

SooJi Min-Maranda, Executive Director,
ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal:

SooJi Min-Maranda

Most anti-Asian bias that makes primetime news is violent. But the most virulent of biases occur each and every day. As a Korean American immigrant, many of the biases I face have not bruised my flesh but instead silenced my very being.

I learned early in life that I was often granted provisional privilege as an East Asian by mainstream U.S. society. That privilege, however, comes with an implicit agreement that I will toe the model minority line. I will swallow insults. I will turn away from confrontation. I will only speak when asked.

Alternatively, I am paid too much attention. I am viewed as exotic and called “Oriental,” or scrutinized for so-called breeches in performing model behavior and over achievement. The expectations are sky high. The ceiling for failure is so low. It's all so tiring.

At the same time, I'm much more than my Asian heritage. I am also Jewish. My Jewish faith, at the best of times, holds and comforts me. At the worst



of times, I find myself again ricocheting between two extremes. Either I am silenced and invisible or being poked full of holes. I want to be set free from this double bind.

Gen Xia Ye Slosberg, Co-Creator and Producer, LUNAR: The Jewish-Asian Film Project:



Gen Xia Ye Slosberg

For white Jews, take a deep look at your own internalized biases, and ways in which you have, intentionally or not, perpetuated harm against Asian Americans in your Jewish community and beyond. Listen to those among you who are Asian American, and learn from our stories.

For all Jews, give financial resources to efforts to funnel direct services and resources to Chinatowns across the country. You can also donate to Asian American-led organizations within the Jewish community, and celebrate the achievement of those folks. If this is available near you, sign up to be part of a civilian patrol or volunteer in your local Chinatown to escort elders. Understand the deep, deep pain we are in, and check in on us.

White Jews can listen and learn! There are incredible stories out there shared by Asian American Jews, such as through LUNAR: The Jewish-Asian Film Project. Also, learn to sit with the discomfort of speaking out against racism, and disrupt instances of racism in your local community, in your family, and beyond.

Learn to listen to our stories when we trust you enough to share without spotlighting and tokenizing us by asking us to represent our entire communities. Lastly, if you want to invite Asian Americans to speak at your shul or nonprofit event, pay us. Always respect the labor of BIPOC, and compensate us fairly.

https://forward.com/opinion/466221/asian-american-jews-atlanta-hate-crimes-speak/?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_2123747