

TJC Member Experiences in *Hevrutot* (small study groups) on Racism

Michele Alperin:

As an Atlanta native, segregation was intrinsic to my life. I of course had some understanding of Black suffering, but not a clue of what it really meant to be an African American in the South. As a child Atlanta Transit buses bore lettering to the right of the driver that read “Colored People Please Move to the Back of the Bus”—and later when green paint covered that terrible message, I would go sit with the African Americans who still sat in the bus’s rearmost seats. As a teen I went to hear the young Julian Bond speak, saw plays by Amiri Baraka (then-Leroi Jones), and opposed Lester Maddox. And after Martin Luther King was murdered and I went to college, my mother and I fought for years in our Sunday night calls about why the Black neighborhood where she had grown up, next door to her parents’ corner grocery, had become more violent. But although my consciousness of racial suffering grew, and I read my first book about white privilege about 10 years ago, it was more an intellectual exercise than a deeply felt experience.

But the past year and a half studying weekly with Linda Milstein has forced me to reevaluate my own life in contrast to the historical and present experiences of African Americans in our country. Now, whenever I see an African American, I acknowledge and try to understand my own visceral responses. And with Linda I reevaluate and question my past. I have wondered why our maid, Iris Thomas, who grew up in a small town in Georgia had big family reunions in New York, about why the street where she lived when I was young was unpaved, about why she had such a long commute to work, and, painfully, why she didn’t immediately get medical care that could well have kept her from dying in her early 70s. I also am ashamed that although I always said hello to our longtime TJC custodian, Jay Craig, I never took the opportunity to learn from this deep thinker—I did, however, have serious talks about race with another custodian, Nate, before he died. Even though the books Linda and I have read together have challenged us to journal about our innermost feelings about race, to see the world through the eyes of African Americans, and to reevaluate our history as a nation in light of the Black history we never learned in school—the path to true inner change is slow even as we penetrate ever new layers of Black suffering.

Eliot and Marsha Freeman:

At our *hevruta*, with my wife, Marsha, and our friend Pegi Lindsley, we read and discussed several books, including *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, *Caste* by Isobel Wilkerson, *Waking Up White* by Debbie Irving, and *This Is The Fire* by Don Lemon. These books and discussions helped us to understand our unearned privilege as an American white male and female. They also helped us to begin to appreciate the lower status assigned to people of color and women in our society. All of us need to listen, with deep humility and respect, in order to

begin to heal the wounds of racial and sexist injustice that still plague our American society. It may be a long and painful journey, but it is long past time to begin.

Lew Gantwerk:

In a Jewish Center program, the title of which was “Examining Racism,” one of the first questions we were asked was “what was the first encounter you had with a person of color?” My answer, along with the answers of nine of the ten participants in the group was “the cleaning lady who came to our house.” My answer embarrassed me and then I realized that I knew nothing about this woman whom I remembered as kind and engaging—not even her last name—or anything about her family, even though she knew my family intimately. This led me to join the *hevruta* that grew out of our initial experiences in that workshop. For the past two years I have been on a personal journey to examine my feelings and understanding of Black Americans—trying to examine my own biases, prejudices, white privilege, and responsibility for the racism that permeates our society. I feel overwhelmed by the burden our fellow citizens live with every day—and the work we have done in this group is changing my life and helping me to become more thoughtful and empathic. While I don’t think this work will end, I welcome it and am determined to continue to learn.

Melissa Hager:

“Now is the Time... to Rise to the Sunlit Path of Racial Justice”: words from Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech delivered on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.

I am not going to write about negotiating with the Ku Klux Klan,
I am not going to write about whether Jews are white or when they became so,
and
I am not going to write about experiences with anti-Semitism.

I write about and embrace the words so eloquently spoken by Dr. King in 1963, that “now is the time...to rise to the sunlit path of racial justice,” to share how one of TJC’s *hevruta* groups was engaged over the last ten months. I use Dr. King’s words, not to elevate or place systemic discrimination of one group over another or to give priority to one group’s pains over another’s; I use this quote to honor Dr. King as we celebrate his legacy and to talk about the work of congregants who, in small groups, came together to study and shed light on the issue of systemic discrimination.

Our group of four read books and attended zoom seminars addressing systemic racism and “white privilege.” The books and seminars contained lists demanding answers by us as readers and participants to determine if we had ever made statements or taken actions that created unseen, unknown, and unintended

microaggressions or created slights and bad feelings. Our group discussed in detail our reactions to these books and seminars and talked about how we could create welcoming communities. Did reading the books and engaging in seminars help? Yes, to some extent partial light was shed on how to achieve racial justice.

But without question, for me, the most moving article that I read shedding light on the path to racial justice was an article about the event removing Confederate General Robert E. Lee's statue in Richmond, Virginia ("New Chapter in Richmond as Lee Statue Comes Down," Sabrina Tavernise, *The New York Times*, Thursday, September 9, 2021, page A9.) New York Times reporter Sabrina Tavernise wrote that the statute's removal is "a symbol of America's unfinished business of race." In that same article the simplest and most profound takeaway spotlighting the path to racial justice was a statement about privilege. While watching the statue come down, onlooker Maggie Johnston, a white waitress who had spent time in prison, told the reporter what her friends say about her, that "I'm a hardworking person and I don't have privilege." In almost Talmudic fashion, Ms. Johnson said she tells her friends that privilege is not about money—she tells them, "(P)rivilege is about thinking the world works for everybody else the way it works for you." And so, the path to racial justice, indeed justice for all, is lighted and ready for all of us to walk if we try to respect each other and take into consideration that our actions may affect others even if we take the walk one step at a time to reach the sunlit path of racial justice.

Bob Karp:

In Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, what she means by *caste* is irrevocable, immutable differences that cannot be altered by education, occupation, or any other distinguishing differences characterizing *social class*. Caste is apparent within our Jewish world as much as outside it: "Pillar #3" of *Caste*, writes Wilkerson, is "endogamy and the control of marriage and mating." When an unattached white Jew enters a group, that person will be offered an opportunity to meet another white Jew of appropriate age, gender, identity or attraction, occupation, or interests. This doesn't happen for non-white Jews. For non-white Jews there is a hierarchy of limitations, with the nadir being for Black Jews. Every other sign of welcome will be present, but it's almost as if a sign "No Negroes may enter these premises" were at the door, to our shame.

I will also share my own experience during the 1962-63 school year, when I had the good fortune to be out in the world as a 22-year-old, between college and medical school, at the peak of the nonviolent civil rights movement. During the days, I was a substitute teacher in West Philadelphia. When not called in, I would hang out at the North Philadelphia office of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

The Jewish participation in CORE was high, though there were folks in the civil rights movement from every religion, ethnicity, and race. One afternoon at the CORE office, I was chatting with my CORE colleague Ed Harrington, who by

name I assumed was not Jewish. To my comment about it, he replied, “No. I’m Jewish too,” illustrating how ubiquitous the Jewish presence was in the movement.

My last job at CORE was to order buses for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. We filled thirteen buses from Philadelphia. At the rally, Rabbi Joachim Prinz spoke immediately before Dr. King. I remember him saying that as a rabbi in Berlin it was clear to him how evil the Nazis were, but it was the lack of response from the “good Germans” that shocked him. He said, **“The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful, and the most tragic problem is silence.”**

Then Dr. King spoke. His memorable “I have a dream” pulled everyone, not just onto their feet but a few millimeters off the ground. Some of us never came down.

There’s still so much to do. We all know that. As Rabbi Tarfon’s famous quote goes, **“We are not required to finish our work, yet neither are we permitted to desist from it.”**

Miki Mendelsohn:

I’m a reader—it’s my pastime and has been for much of my life. When I was younger, I read for pleasure and now I read to learn, to open my mind to things I didn’t learn in school in the South (but I wouldn’t have learned them in the North either). I am a member of the Black Voices Book Group at the Princeton Public Library, which I recommend to all of you. Each month we read and discuss a fiction or nonfiction book by a black author, and it is a great opportunity to learn.

But it is our *hevruta* in which I meet with two other TJC members who are white and two women of color who are not Jewish where I have begun to really learn and to look internally and examine myself. We meet weekly for a couple of hours and read only one chapter from a book on race. It is during that time that we have the chance to really examine the content and discuss what it means to us, what it says to us. My partners open my eyes to what I am missing, and we discuss other ways to understand each sentence. We are currently reading *How to Be an Antiracist*, by Ibram Kendi. If you’ve read it, you know that every chapter is very dense and maybe difficult but very important.

We think we can read these things alone and reflect on them by ourselves. But I can tell you this is a completely different experience. I am beginning to see what others have gone through and how and why they see things differently and what I have missed all my life, growing up white, in a white family and a white synagogue and a white neighborhood . . .

Linda Milstein:

For the last year and a half, Michele Alperin and I have been studying racism together through a series of books, some recommended by Linda Oppenheim, others discovered on our own. We meet most weeks, in person or virtually, depending on COVID and the weather, spending about an hour and a half discussing the texts we agreed we would cover for each session. This paired study, *hevruta*, has given me a much deeper, more nuanced understanding both of my own racism and what “structural racism” means in our country and culture.

Using *hevruta* as the method of study has had many benefits. Here are some:

- Shared reading of the same texts, one or two chapters at a time
- Commitment to each other to come prepared to discuss the text(s)
- Deeper exploration of the texts than I would do by myself
- Opportunity to reflect on my personal history as it relates to the text, share it with Michele, and learn about hers
- Recommendations we make to each other about books, podcasts, films we are not yet including in our study but have found worthwhile on the topic of racism

This learning has been revelatory, dismaying, shocking, sometimes hard to take in, always mind-expanding. We’ve talked about action based on this learning. That will be the next step even as we continue to study.

Linda Oppenheim:

I and three other Jewish Center members were part of a discussion group using Layla Saad’s *Me and White Supremacy* as our text when the *hevruta* formed. It’s a book whose author challenges readers to examine and name their biases. Our group differs from the others because it includes one African American and one Indian American member. Does that make those of us who are white less open about our biases? Perhaps. It does, however, allow us to hear what it is like to live as a person of color in a white world, how what we’re reading affects people we know. I am also moved simply knowing that, for a year and a half, more than a dozen TJC members have committed themselves to gaining a deeper understanding of race in America, how it affects others and themselves, through the Jewish tradition of study.

Alison Politziner:

Gathering together with Ellen and Lew each Tuesday I wondered which one of us would let out the first painful sigh of the hour. Chapter by chapter, *The Underground Railroad* pulled us into the history of horror inflicted upon the Africans brought to our shores 400 years ago. We watched one another in our Zoom boxes shaking our heads in disbelief of the cruelty and sharing our fears of what hideous details of brutality the next chapter would bring.

As we absorbed the impact of this historical fiction we took another step towards a deeper understanding of our nation's history and recognized that sharing these emotions as we looked back was bringing us closer to an understanding of the mistrust, fear, vulnerability, and anger played out in our country today. We appreciated the opportunity to discuss our responses to the book chapter by chapter while also speaking about current events.

Ellen Pristach:

For me, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates gave the expression “walk a mile in my shoes” new meaning . . . “walk a mile in my body.”

In his book Coates addresses the Black American male existence in an open letter to his teenage son. Racism, Coates states, toward Black people is centered on forcibly taking away physical control of the Black person's body. Beginning with slavery, Coates explains throughout the book how the destruction of the Black body is still prevalent today. A clear example of the destruction of the Black body is the regularity of police brutality and how often it ends in murder, without any consequence for the police officer responsible. Coates references many Black persons killed by police, including his friend Prince Jones, noting that the tragedies of racism are impossible to escape for Black people, even those well off.

Shortly after the murder of George Floyd, Gayle King of CBS Mornings, being the mother of a Black son, cried as she expressed the fear she always felt when he was out driving, worried that he would be stopped by police and possibly harmed or killed . . . just because he is Black. I have a son, and when he began driving I only worried that he drive safely . . . I never once thought of the possibility of him being stopped by the police because of the color of his skin!

By reading this and other books, plays, memoirs, and much more with my *hevruta* partners, I have gained empathy, a valuable education, and a greater understanding of what it means to live in a Black body.

Debbi Dunn Solomon

When George Floyd was murdered, I was horrified as a human being, as a Jew. I frankly did not think of myself as White. I knew I was not racist, but I had never thought about how to be antiracist. As a Jew, I thought I was especially empathetic to victims of discrimination. After all, my own family was red-lined out of neighborhoods that had covenants against Jews and Black people. Now, thanks to the well-chosen books, magazine articles, radio podcasts, videos and webinars brought forward and discussed with my *hevruta* partners: I learned that I was like the child who does not even know enough to ask a question.

I thought the question was, “what can we do about ‘this’?” When I attended the TJC Examining Racism workshop organized by Paget Berger, Miki Mendelson, Linda Oppenheim, Lori Simon, and Wilma Solomon, I was struck by how little I

understood “this.” My focus on “what to do” revealed my ignorance of embedded, systemic injustice and of the infinite nuances of bias. I am grateful to be studying the complexity of both the history and contemporary issues with my *hevruta* partners. In addition to reading the books you’ve seen listed, we’ve focused on articles about politicizing critical race theory and novels that share truth in stories.

What I did not expect: to discover the double pain experienced by Jews of color and to see how I may be exacerbating it. I encourage everyone to watch “*Community Check-In: Are We Embracing or Just Tolerant?*” <https://bit.ly/3FliQtg> a presentation by Heather Miller, president of Flatbush Jewish Center and leader of United Synagogue’s *Kol Tzedek* project. (Also please see “We Are Family: Rethinking Race in the Jewish Community,” a Yom Kippur sermon by Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, <https://bit.ly/3HTKsag>.)

I grew up in a White, homogenous, Jewish community and I taught religious school from that perspective. Yet, the Jewish people have always been diverse—reflecting the countries where we live, the intellectual and cultural influences of our times, the languages and customs of our families, and the evolving interpretation of our texts and teachers. Now I show my students more inclusive photos and stories. I have begun thinking about alternatives to the way I might “welcome someone of color to ‘our’ synagogue.” In Hebrew, *baruch ha-bah* means “blessed is the person who comes.” The emphasis is on the community being enriched by the new person, “we are glad you are here.”

The more I learn and challenge my own assumptions, the more I recognize the complexity of dismantling racism in our society and in the Jewish community—and the urgency. As Jews we know we must keep studying, *and we must act* against injustice. I look forward to joining other members of TJC to explore what we can do together to make a difference. “If not now, when?”

Wilma Solomon:

When I was about 15, family friends gave me the book *Cry the Beloved Country* about apartheid in South Africa. That was the beginning of my journey to eventually recognizing the historical and continuing racism against Black people in our nation, including our Princeton community. I am focusing on Black people here but I recognize that pernicious racism has affected our many marginalized communities. I was a “good” white person—volunteering with “underprivileged” youth; attending rallies and demonstrations; supporting civil and human rights groups. I am not saying these were inconsequential things, but I was involved at arm’s length, not grasping the systemic nature of the racism underlying the problems I thought I was addressing, or my own responsibility and role in the perpetuation of this system. It’s been a very slow journey (almost 60 years) with many detours to take long naps along the way—the prerogative of being white in America.

Books such as *The Color of Law* and *The New Jim Crow* in recent years taught me about the inequities caused by the purposeful discrimination in our criminal justice and housing systems. The book *Waking up White* and the work of Peggy McIntosh enlightened me about the ease and access to resources that being white has brought me. Hearing interviews with Black youth awakened me to the toxic effects of stereotypes that create barriers to achievement and fulfillment of their potential. In his book *My Grandmother's Hands*, trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem introduced me to the concept of “white body supremacy” and the need for healing in our culture. Most recently I have been listening to the voices of Jews of color and their disappointing experiences within white Jewish spaces.

I have also discovered the deep-seated biases and preconceptions that confront me almost every day—these come up when I am out in the supermarket and see that the person at the register is Black; or when I meet a new person in town who is Black, and override my assumption about their work, and ask whether they are affiliated with the university. Or sitting at home in front of the screen I recognize that I am judging the Black newscaster or performer by some long-held stereotype.

For me the most crucial and sometimes most difficult road to becoming antiracist is to be in the company of and in fellowship with Black people. I have celebrated and grieved with Black friends and colleagues. But I have also caused hurt and disappointment and been disrespectful. I have made amends and I haven't yet made amends. I have accepted that I will never fully understand nor embody what it is to be Black in America. But I will keep taking the next step towards that understanding, no matter how long it takes. There is no turning back.