

Social Justice Committee

A Response to Rodney Muhammad, President of the Philadelphia Chapter of the NAACP

During the last several weeks four Black personalities posted online anti-Semitic memes and statements that disparage the Jewish community in vile and hateful ways. However, the most recent posting by Minister Rodney Muhammad is different from the earlier postings, and it demands condemnation from all members of our community, Black and White alike, who work to eradicate hate from our society. Whether he likes it or not, Minister Muhammad speaks not as an individual, but as the President of the Philadelphia Chapter of the NAACP, an [organization](#) founded by a group of “White, Jewish and African-American men and women who were inspired to action” [following the] 1908 race riot in President Abraham Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield, Illinois....” Minister Muhammad speaks as a leader in the Black community, and so what he did carries a seed of hatred that could grow among his online followers. We need to recognize the extent of the harm he causes.

On July 24, 2020 Minister Muhammad [posted](#) on his Facebook page the meme known as [the Happy Merchant](#), a cartoon face with highly stereotypical Jewish features and a large bejeweled hand pushing down a mass of people. The post included photos of three Black personalities who had recently posted antisemitic comments on social media: Ice Cube, DeSean Jackson and Nick Cannon, along with the quote, “To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize” which was falsely attributed to Voltaire but originated with Kevin Strom, an American neo-Nazi.

Here’s the problem. People listen to Minister Muhammad as is evident from the comment from a reader that appears on Minister Muhammad’s [Facebook page](#) (which he has since removed). The comment stated, “Feeling thoughtful in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. YOU AIN’T NEVER LIED!” This is how hatred spreads. This kind of posting should be anathema to any member of the Philadelphia Chapter of the NAACP, to say nothing of its President. On July 27, 2020 Minister Muhammad released a [statement](#) in which he said, in part, “Earlier this week, I shared a post on social media in an attempt to start a dialogue around criticism and understanding...It was never my intention to offend anyone or cause any hurt... The NAACP strongly condemns any offensive language or imagery and stands against all forms of hate speech and anti-Semitism. I stand with all members of the Jewish faith in the fight for social justice, and I intend to use this opportunity for thoughtful conversations with both the Black and Jewish communities.”

Let’s take Minister Muhammad at his word. Let’s have those thoughtful conversations. Shared learning among Blacks and Jews is our greatest strength in any joint effort to fight against hate. Both communities need to learn our history, to understand the sources of hatred that are used against us, and to pledge to name racism and antisemitism when we see it. We have partners in this effort. In his [column](#) in the *Hollywood Reporter* Kareem Abdul-Jabbar decried the lack of outrage in response to the anti-Semitic statements by Black celebrities. He wrote, “Even the apologies floundered, more attempts at spin than true contrition... It’s not enough to have good intentions, because it’s the actual deeds — and words — which have the real impact. In this case destructive impact.” Charles Barkley, Hall of Fame NBA player [said](#), “That stuff should never come up in your vocabulary, and that stuff should never come up in your heart. I don’t

understand it and I'm never going to accept it. *Atlantic* contributing writer Jemele Hill, wrote, "The thirst for liberation and equality can never come at the expense of dehumanizing other marginalized groups—especially at a time when hate crimes against Jews have increased significantly." In connection with Minister Muhammad's posting the Philadelphia Muslim Jewish Circle of Friends [wrote](#), "We unequivocally condemn Minister Muhammed's actions and ask that the NAACP hold him accountable...This action by Minister Muhammed is in direct violation of the very principles upon which the NAACP was founded." Political leaders calling for Minister Muhammad's resignation include Governor Tom Wolf, PA Attorney General Josh Shapiro, State Senator Anthony Williams, and State Representative Joanna McClinton. By Tuesday, 13 Black and Jewish [leaders](#) called for Minister Muhammad to apologize.

We must continue, in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, to be "drum majors for justice." We must write letters to newspapers and post comments on online media calling out antisemitism and racism wherever we see it. We must call leaders, whoever they are, when their organizations veer toward hatred. Most important, we must join in coalition with others from all faith traditions who are devoted to the value of loving thy neighbor. In the words of Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who spoke at the March on Washington in 1963, "neighbor is a moral concept. It means collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity." Minister Muhammad gives us a wake-up call to the hard work that lies ahead.