

REFLECT

**HEARTS AND MINDS:
A Model Discussion About Racial Justice for
Reform Congregations and Communities**

rac.org/racialjustice



**Religious
Action
Center**
of Reform Judaism



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HEARTS AND MINDS:

A Model First Discussion about Racial Justice for Reform Congregations and Communities

Through small group discussion we will explore how we feel and think about racism in America. We will share how racism impacts us in our own communities; explore how our understanding of racism has deepened over the past year, and learn new ways to raise this topic within our congregations and act effectively for change. We are bringing our hearts and minds to conversation and action on race in America.

Goals:

1. Participants will connect the fight against racial injustice to Jewish values and history.
2. Participants will see racism as an issue in which Jews are complicit and by which they are impacted.
3. Participants will see Reform Judaism as a vehicle for confronting racial injustice.
4. Participants will be inspired to commit to act together to combat racial injustice through the frame of “reflect, relate and reform.”

Schedule (1 hour, 45 minutes total):

- 0:00-0:05 Frame/Set Induction
- 0:05-0:20 Textual Grounding
- 0:20-0:30 Bringing in Voices of Color
- 0:30-0:33 Intro to Small Groups
- 0:33-1:03 Small Group Discussion
- 1:03-1:13 Debrief of Small Group Discussion
- 1:13-1:28 Discussion of Types of Racism
- 1:28-1:43 Testing Our Commitment to Action
- 1:43-1:45 Closing Prayer

5 minutes	<p>Frame/Set Induction</p> <p>We are nearing a tipping point. The hearts of so many Americans have been broken by tragic deaths in Charleston, Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland and so many other places. The Black Lives Matter movement has woken people up to racial injustice. The number of people who say that we need to make changes to achieve racial equality has grown substantially – and it includes a majority of white Americans. A bipartisan effort to take on mass incarceration is gaining momentum. There is a real possibility of change for racial justice.</p> <p>We in the Reform Movement are working at the state and national level to help bring about racial justice. Through reflecting on our role in America’s racialized systems and institutions, relating to African-Americans, Latinos and other people</p>

<p>15 minutes</p>	<p>of color and reforming the laws and policies that reproduce and reinforce racial injustice, our actions can make a real difference.</p> <p>Today, by reflecting deeply on racial injustice and what it means for us as Jews, we take a small but important step to bring about a better, more racially-just world. We will reflect on Jewish teaching on race, listen to the voices of people of color, share our stories of race and name our commitment to work to advance racial justice. Similar discussions are happening in Reform synagogues across the country. Our goal tonight is to understand how we are complicit in and impacted by race in America, and to test whether we want to move into action together to confront racial injustice.</p> <p>Textual Grounding: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel on Race in America</p> <p>In a speech delivered in 1963 during the height of America’s battle for civil rights, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called on white America to recognize the powerful disparities that existed between whites and blacks in his time. If you identify as white, how do you relate to his words? If you identify as black or as a person of color, how do you relate to these words today? Do Heschel’s words still resonate? What type of America does Heschel describe, and how is our vision different fifty years later?</p> <p>The opening:</p> <p>“At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses’ words were: ‘Thus says the [Eternal One], the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me.’ While Pharaoh retorted: ‘Who is the [Eternal One], that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the [Eternal One], and moreover I will not let Israel go.’ The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The Exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do these words resonate in light of all of the stories of racial injustice (police-related violence, campus upheaval, etc.) we see and experience today? • Updating the story to today, who is Pharaoh, who is Moses, who are the Israelites?
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10 minutes	<p>Heschel goes on to take issue with the whole idea of race. . .</p> <p>“In several ways man is set apart from all beings created in six days. The Bible does not say, God created the plant or the animal; it says, God created different kinds of plants, different kinds of animals (Genesis 1: 11 12, 21-25). In striking contrast, it does not say, God created different kinds of man, men of different colors and races; it proclaims, God created one single man. From one single man all men are descended. To think of man in terms of white, black, or yellow is more than an error. It is an eye disease, a cancer of the soul.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some commentators on American society claim that distinctions of race are increasingly obsolete. Do you agree? • What are the problems or limitations of a “colorblind” society? Who wins and who loses when we fail to acknowledge race as a factor? • Is the Genesis quote here in tension with the idea from Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5: “What demonstrates the greatness of the Holy One? That a man strikes many coins from the same die, and all the coins are alike. But the Holy One, Ruler of Rulers, strikes every person from the die of the First Man, and yet no one is quite the same.”? If so, can we rectify that tension? <p>Bringing in voices of color</p> <p>Now we will hear one or two short personal stories of experiences of racism by people of color. <i>These stories can happen in a variety of ways:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>People of color from your synagogue can tell their stories. In this case, the individuals should be contacted well in advance of the program to ensure that they are comfortable sharing and have adequate time to prepare.</i> 2) <i>A guest speaker can tell a personal story.</i> 3) <i>A few short videos of people of color telling their stories can be very powerful. Here are some short videos you can use. We don’t recommend you show the whole video, but rather the segment of the video indicated by the time codes the follow the URLs below.</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Ilana Kaufman’s Eli Talk about Black Jews.</i> http://elitalks.org/who-counts-race-and-jewish-future 0:00-1:47 b. <i>Harvard students talk about their experiences of race.</i> http://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonvingiano/21-black-harvard-students-share-their-experiences-through-a#.dlNX8JJrq 0:34 – 3:48 c. <i>Stories of Racial Profiling in Durham, NC</i> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPpw0B5DNiA 0:39 – 2:55
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<p>3 minutes</p>	<p>4) <i>People can read short excerpts of powerful stories from <u>Between the World and Me</u> by Ta-Nehisi Coates, <u>Just Mercy</u> by Bryan Stevenson or another text that deals with racism and racial injustice.¹</i></p> <p><i>Give people a short time to reflect on what they heard. The leader can then ask for their two-word reaction to the story/stories (e.g. “very powerful”). Of course, one or two stories cannot encompass the broad range of experience of people of color. But these stories are a start, a perch where we can look at racism in America and reflect upon our role in confronting injustice.</i></p> <p>Intro to Small Groups</p> <p>To move to racial justice, we need to bring the accumulated Jewish wisdom of the ages, the voices of people of color who directly experience racial injustice and our own experiences of race. We will now move toward talking about our own stories of race. Now we are going to hear from you:</p> <p>Racial justice and injustice are not just things that happens out there, but also things that happens in here (<i>tapping the heart</i>). We are all involved in racial justice and injustice, whether we like it or not.</p> <p>We are going to divide into small groups of 7-10 people to share stories about our experiences of racial injustice.</p> <p>In our small groups we are going to share a recent personal story or experience from our own lives that demonstrates how we are impacted by racism. In other words, you might share a story about how have you been hurt by racism or how have you benefited from racism. You could also talk about a time when you have personally witnessed racism.</p> <p>Here is an example of the type of story participants might share: “I live in Los Angeles with my family. I would like for my child to go to our neighborhood public school. I believe in public education and want my child to interact with all kinds of people within a school setting, but my neighborhood school is a terrible school because of largely segregated communities and it is under-resourced. Therefore, I send my child to private school – which pains me because my values are not being passed down to my child, and I am not providing the environment I want to provide my child with. But I am able to do this because of my privilege—I have the privilege to opt out. The resources to afford it. So I am also part of the problem.”</p> <p>When we think about personal stories of racism, many of us turn to experiences or received stories of anti-Semitism. We should be a little cautious when employing</p>
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¹ We will provide the readings that people can use.

	<p>these stories. When they help us build a bridge of empathy to better hear the lived experiences of others, they can be very valuable points of reference in our work on racial injustice. But if we get caught in the trap of comparative victimization, or "my/our suffering is greater or more significant than yours," we may unintentionally put up walls between ourselves and the people outside the Jewish community with whom we are trying to connect. We must stay alert to the danger that in privileging our own experience, we run the risk of silencing or minimizing others.</p>
30 minutes	<p>Small Group discussion</p> <p><i>Small group facilitators should be recruited and prepped in advance. They will set guidelines and ask participants to share a story in response to the prompt.</i></p> <p><i>Small group facilitators will share their 2-minute story first within the group.</i></p> <p><i>When everyone has shared their 2-minute story, the facilitator will hopefully be able to gather threads from the stories that reveal racism existing on two different levels:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Individual racism – a person’s biases, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes and relationships</i> • <i>Structural racism – institutionalized policies and practices, rules, procedures and systems</i> <p><i>Explain the two levels of racism by naming the way some of the stories told during the small group discussion are examples of personal or structural racism. Ask people to talk about how they see the difference between individual and structural racism.</i></p>
10 minutes	<p>Debrief of Small Group Discussions</p> <p><i>People return to the large group.</i></p> <p><i>How did you feel about the discussion? Take a couple of responses.</i></p> <p><i>How many of you heard a story about race that moved you? People raise hands.</i></p> <p><i>When telling your story, did anyone surprise themselves, maybe saying something you have never said out loud before? People raise hands.</i></p> <p><i>Leader asks a couple of people to recount a story that moved them (NOT their own story, but someone else’s story). Leader should remind participants not to share who in their group told that story originally unless the individual expressly gave them permission to do so.</i></p>

<p>15 Minutes</p>	<p>Conclusion: the stories we shared, the themes we noticed – they move us to act for a more racially just society.</p> <p>Discussion of Types of Racism</p> <p>I want to talk about three kinds of racism.</p> <p>The first is overt and conscious discrimination. It is what happens when people deliberately value white folks over people of color due to a misguided ideology that believes people of color are inferior.</p> <p>What are some examples of overt and conscious racism? <i>Take answers from the group.</i></p> <p><i>[Here is an answer to the question, if you want an additional answer besides what the group gave: This unjustified bias reached its extreme and tragic form in Charleston, South Carolina, when a white man deliberately opened fire on a prayer meeting and killed nine people in cold blood because they were African-American.]</i></p> <p>How should we as Jews respond to overt and conscious racism? <i>Take answers from the group.</i> All people of good faith must condemn overt and conscious discrimination.</p> <p>A second form of racism is implicit bias. This is a “pattern of discrimination that reflects automatic, unconscious thought processes, not careful deliberations” (to use the words of Michelle Alexander, the author of <i>The New Jim Crow</i>).</p> <p>Alexander tells about a study that involved a video game where respondents were shown an image of an individual holding either a gun or another object (such as a wallet or cell phone) and told to decide as quickly as possible whether to shoot the image. Respondents were more likely to mistake a black target as armed when he was not and a white target as unarmed when he was in fact armed.² This study revealed implicit bias, which is not correlated to conscious attitudes. You can be consciously opposed to racism and still have implicit bias. African-American respondents in the study mistook who was armed at roughly the same rate as whites. African-Americans also experience implicit bias.</p> <p>Did any examples of implicit bias come up in your small group? <i>Give people a chance to share a couple of stories.</i></p> <p>What should be our response as Jews to implicit racism? <i>Take Answers.</i> We must reflect on our own biases and challenge our unconscious attitudes.</p>
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² Pp. 106-107 in *The New Jim Crow*, in case you want to read about the study yourself.

<p>15 minutes</p>	<p>The third kind of racism is structural racism. Even if tomorrow we eliminated all overt and conscious racism and all implicit bias, we would not have racial justice. Racial inequities have been baked into the system and will continue without any conscious or unconscious actions on our parts. Structural racism is a system of social structures that produce and reproduce cumulative, durable, race-based inequities.</p> <p>Can anyone give an example of structural racism? <i>Take answers from the group and/or share the following example of structural bias:</i> Blacks were explicitly and deliberately excluded from the GI Bill and federal housing programs in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Government policy, bank loan practices and realtor actions supported whites in buying homes and prevented African-Americans from doing the same, at a time when homeownership was affordable. These deliberate racist policies allowed many white families to accumulate wealth and enter the middle class and prevented African-American families from doing the same. These racist housing and lending practices have been largely discontinued today, but the effects of the decades of racist housing policies linger on.</p> <p>How do we as Jews respond to structural racism? <i>Take answers.</i> It is not enough make sure we do not discriminate or show bias. Those of us who are white benefit from structural racism, and we have an obligation to confront and dismantle structural racism.</p> <p>Testing our commitment for action</p> <p>Racism violates the core Jewish principle that all human beings are created <i>b'tselem Elohim</i>, in the divine image (Genesis 1:27), deserving of the dignity and value inherent in every human being. One of the proudest threads in the weave of Reform Jewish history is our alliance with African-Americans and other people of color in the struggle against racism and for civil rights.</p> <p>The events in our country over the past year remind us in a stark way that racism still threatens the promise of America. African-Americans, Latinos and other people of color face the constant threat of racial profiling and death, unreasonable restrictions and obstacles to voting, unequal access to quality education and mass incarceration. All these things that we have seen so vividly in the last year demonstrate that we must renew and extend our commitment to pursue racial justice.</p> <p>The Reform Movement has begun a campaign to dismantle structural racial inequality in our country. This campaign has a three-part strategy (the three Rs):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) REFLECT: Explore the systemic root causes of racial inequality in your community and the ways we are complicit in and impacted by racism.
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2 minutes	<p>2) RELATE: Develop relationships with partners across race in our communities and with coalition partners with whom we will pursue racial justice.</p> <p>3) REFORM: Take meaningful action with partners in pursuit of policy change that takes real steps to dismantle structural racism.</p> <p>The way forward is clear. We have taken an important step tonight: our REFLECTion on race.</p> <p>The question before us now is: do we want to come together as a synagogue to take action together to combat racial injustice? How do we want to act internally, locally, and on a broader stage?</p> <p><i>If the conversation needs more fuel, you can ask some or all of the following questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of actions are most appealing to you? • What will be hardest about acting together as a synagogue to combat racial injustice? • The question isn't what other people in our synagogue should do. We can only do what we the members are willing to do. The question is what are you individually willing to do with your fellow synagogue members? <p><i>If there seems to be a will to action by those present say this:</i> All those who would like to be part of a synagogue racial justice campaign, clap. <i>Keep clapping:</i> you deserve a round of applause for agreeing to take the risk to act for racial justice. <i>Once clapping stops:</i> If you are interested in helping to plan the next steps, please let me know after the session ends.</p> <p><i>If it there is not the will to act or if the sense is mixed, say this:</i> We took a brave step tonight, with honest discussion and reflection about racial injustice and our roll in it. We will keep talking about what our next step should be.</p> <p>Closing Prayer—definitely feel free to create you own!</p> <p>Please join me in a final word of blessing—Adonai, please give us the inspiration, the strength, the capacity, the will, the determination, to pursue the world as we know it should be—not parched with oppression, but overflowing with justice. Amen.</p>
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