

***WAKING UP WHITE* by Debby Irving**
A RAC Reads Facilitation and Discussion Guide Compiled by the Religious Action Center and Rabbi Andrea Goldstein, Congregation Shaare Emeth

Introduction:

The following guide is intended to facilitate conversations about the book *Waking Up White*, by Debby Irving. In *Waking Up White*, Irving offers a personal exploration of how Americans are socialized to hold racial biases and stereotypes, as well as a manual to begin to deconstruct those false beliefs and reach a deeper understanding of modern-day racism.

RAC Reads is a program by the Religious Action Center to encourage reading groups that explore contemporary social justice topics in the context of Jewish teachings and values. The discussion guides are designed for families, congregations and communities. As such, not all of the facilitation tips and discussion questions may be applicable in all cases. Feel free to take from and adapt the information provided here as you structure your own conversations.

We hope that this guide will spark engaging and challenging discussions among Reform Jews about race and racism within our communities and in the United States. For more information about the RAC's current work on racial justice, visit our website at www.rac.org.

Facilitation Tips:

Conversations about race, racism, whiteness and privilege can often be uncomfortable. It is important to create a discussion space in which participants are made to feel safe and their perspectives respected. Below are some tips for facilitating conversations about difficult topics.

1. Set group goals for the conversation before it begins. Discuss why participants are in the room, what they hope to learn and what they believe constitutes a productive and successful discussion.
2. Establish community guidelines prior to the start of the conversation. These communally-created rules ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate. They can be formally written down and displayed somewhere in the room, or informally discussed and agreed upon. The facilitator can also model some of these behaviors for the group. Some common community guidelines are:
 - “I” statements – always speak from a personal place, using “I” rather than “we,” “you” or generalities
 - Remind participants that, although this is a Jewish space, that does not mean that there is not a diversity of identities (race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, age, ability, etc.) represented in the room

- Ex: “*In my experience*, I have found that society perceives me as white.” vs. “*Everyone* knows that *all* Jews are white.”
 - Trust intent – trust that no one in the group intends to harm or to offend
 - Name impact – inform the group when someone has said something that offends you, and explain why
 - Ex: “I found that last statement difficult to hear because my personal experience has been different.”
 - Step up, step back – be mindful of how much you and others in the room are speaking and try to take a step back when you find yourself speaking too often
3. Provide participants with a paper copy of the discussion questions when they arrive and include space between each question to draft ideas for answers. Give participants several minutes before launching into discussion to organize their thoughts.
 4. If you find that a participant seems distressed during the group conversation, ask the others in the group to break off into one-on-one discussions about a particular question and then approach that person individually.
 5. Actively facilitate. Don’t be afraid to reroute the conversation if it strays too far off track, or to solicit answers from those who have not spoken often.
 6. At the same time, encourage participants to explore difficult subjects and to push personal boundaries, even if it means making mistakes. Within reason, allow participants to steer the conversation towards topics that are relevant and important to them.
 7. Debrief after the discussion is finished. Ask participants what went well and what did not. Talk about ways to potentially improve future conversations.

Discussion Questions:

The following questions are divided according to the sections of *Waking Up White*.

Childhood in White

In this section of the book, Ms. Irving thinks back to the assumptions, both spoken and unspoken, that her family transmitted about race and class, self and others.

- Thinking back, did your family ever talk about issues of race and class? If so, what was the content of those discussions?
- As a child, what was your understanding of why some people were wealthy and some people were not?
- What was your family’s attitude about people in power?
- How did your faith fit into discussions about wealth, race and power?

For Discussion Leaders: Allow people to discuss what unspoken (or spoken) messages they may have absorbed about race and class from their childhoods. If people share that they were only taught to see people as people – and to not see race or class – ask them if they think this was a good thing, or if it may have been harmful in any way. Also try to have participants wrestle with Judaism’s role in their understanding of race.

Midlife Wake-Up Calls

In this section, Ms. Irving shares some of the sobering history she learned in her “Racial and Cultural Identity” class. On p. 30 she writes, “Not thinking I had a race, the idea of asking me to study my ‘racial identity’ felt ludicrous.”

- What are the ways in which you describe yourself to others? By gender? Religion? Sexual identity? Marital status? Familial status (parent, sibling, grandparent, etc.)? Is race ever a part of that description?
- Is it important for white people to perceive and understand whiteness?
- What “aha” or “waking up” moments did you have while reading this section of the book? If you did not have a moment like this while reading the book, do you remember having a “waking up” moment about race previously? What was it? How did it occur?
- How does Judaism impact your racial identity? How does your racial identity impact your Judaism?
- Do you think that American Jews are generally perceived as white? If so, where do Jews of Color fit into this perception?

For Discussion Leaders: Be sure to remain aware of and sensitive to the racial and ethnic diversity of the participants. Individuals may provide very different answers about whiteness and “waking up” based on their own experiences and identities, but all responses are valid.

Why Didn’t I Wake Up Sooner?

Here Ms. Irving delves more deeply into white privilege and starts to discuss the discomfort we can feel in speaking to one another across racial lines. On p. 71 she writes: “Privilege is a strange thing in that you notice it least when you have it most.” She also shares part of a piece called “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”

- What privileges are granted simply for being white?
- What complications arise in facilitating conversations across race? What role does white privilege have in shaping these complications?
- In what ways has your Jewish upbringing supported or challenged white privilege?
- Have you ever had anyone doubt or minimize an experience of racism, sexism, homophobia or anti-Semitism? How did that make you feel?
- Have you ever second-guessed another person’s experience when it comes to racism or some other form of discrimination?

For Discussion Leaders: You may wish to point out the section on cross-racial conversation and formality on pgs. 76-79 and discuss.

Rethinking Key Concepts

In these chapters Ms. Irving debunks a number of stories that white people tell themselves about their relationship with race in America.

- How do good people help to perpetuate systemic racism?
- How does “colorblindness” help to perpetuate systemic racism?
- What is the Robin Hood syndrome and how does it affect white and black people?
- Have the social justice programs at our synagogue/in our community played into any of these stories? If so, how?

Twenty-Five Years of Tossing and Turning

Ms. Irving speaks about instances in her life of trying to work with people of color, of mistakes she made and lessons she learned.

- Have you tried to form relationships across racial lines? If so, were you successful? If not, what has held you back?
- When do you feel inside or outside of social circles? Does being Jewish ever affect how “included” you feel in the secular world? Does being Jewish ever make you feel more connected with people on the “outside?”
- What do these chapters suggest, if anything, about the generational effects of racism?
- On p. 128, Ms. Irving writes: “White people becoming racially aware and coaching other white people to do the same is so important.” Why is it important for white people to take on this responsibility for ourselves?

For Discussion Leaders: On p. 145, in discussing the aftermath of Jane Elliott’s controversial experiment, Ms. Irving writes: “I wonder why that same outrage against her experiment, which ostracized white children for one day, doesn’t carry over to how white people respond to the way people of color, especially black men, women and children, have been treated for years.” Point this out and discuss.

Leaving My Comfort Zone

In this section, Ms. Irving details her work in becoming a diversity and antiracism teacher. She shares guidelines regarding conversational ground rules on p. 172.

- Do you agree with the guidelines Ms. Irving describes? In your opinion, are any guidelines missing?
- How can white people prepare to listen, without judgment, to the experiences of people with color? Why is it important for them to do so?

For Discussion Leaders: On p. 183, focus on the concept of the “Beloved Community.” Ask how people feel about this concept and try to articulate realistic avenues and obstacles in making this idea a reality.

Inner Work

These chapters detail the continuing work that white people need to do in order to be partners in the work of dismantling racism.

- Discuss the following topics:
 - A multicultural approach vs. a “melting pot” approach when thinking about communities
 - Becoming culturally competent
 - The often hidden dominant white culture
 - Interdependence vs. individualism
 - The difference between equality and equity
- How do these ideas connect with Jewish values?

Outer Work and Reclaiming My Humanity

These chapters begin to help us think about where we might want to go from here.

- On p. 219 Ms. Irving writes: “Either I’m intentionally and strategically working against [racism] or I’m aiding and abetting the system.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- How can you move from being a bystander to an ally? Be specific.
- What qualities make a good ally? What behaviors or attitudes can compromise allyship?
- How can we make our synagogues more inclusive and welcoming of Jews of Color?
- What can we gain – as individuals and as a community – by working together with individuals and communities of color to end racism? What have we lost if we miss out on these opportunities?
- Where should we go from here?

Additional Resources

Suggested Books

- *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson
- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine
- *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson
- *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin

Suggested Websites

- www.rac.org/civil-rights
- www.debbyirving.com
- www.witnessingwhiteness.com