

RAC Reads Guide
***Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates**
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Introduction:

The following guide is intended to facilitate conversations about *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Currently, Coates serves as a national correspondent at *The Atlantic*, where he has published groundbreaking articles on race and racism including “The Case for Reparations.” His writings have also been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington City Paper* and *Philadelphia Weekly*. Coates received a “Genius Grant” from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in 2015. *Between the World and Me* was awarded the 2015 National Book Award for Nonfiction.

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:
 - a. “I” statements – always speak from a personal place, using “I” rather than “we,” “you” or generalities
 - i. 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
 - ii. Ex: “*In my experience*, I have found that society perceives me as white.” vs. “*Everyone* knows that *all* Jews are white.”

- b. Trust intent – trust that no one in the group intends to harm or to offend
 - c. Name impact – inform the group when someone has said something that offends you, and explain why
 - i. Ex: “I found that last statement difficult to hear because my personal experience has been different.”
 - d. 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.

Questions for Discussion:

1. On page 7, Coates writes: “But race is the child of racism, not the father.” He seems to be suggesting here that racism precedes race and that without racism, there is no category of race. Do you agree?
2. In the same paragraph, Coates puts genealogy and physiognomy in opposition to hierarchy. He writes: “that the preeminence of hue and hair...can correctly organize a society...that they signify deeper attributes...is the new idea...” (page 7). What Coates appears to be saying here is that in a different social system, genealogy (parents, grandparents, etc.) and physiognomy (physical features of the face) would be just that, but in America (and elsewhere to be sure) they determine hierarchy. Is this way of looking at race and racism new to you? Does Coates put words to what is otherwise taken for granted or is he dispelling a myth about American social equality?
3. On page eleven, Coates introduces “the Dream.” What is “the Dream” according to Coates? Who gets to access “the Dream” and who does not? Does “the Dream” seem familiar to you? To what extent is “the Dream” applicable to the American Jewish community? What are Jewish dreams? What has been the most successful Jewish dream of the last one hundred years? Is this dream your dream?
4. Coates writes: “The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing.” (page 50) What does he mean by this? Is there a relationship between the creative arts (art, writing, music etc.) and being an outsider?

5. The Hebrew word “Ivri,” can mean “the other” or “from the other side.” Abraham was “the Ivri.” He came as a foreigner to Canaan. What does all this mean in terms of Jews as artists, courageous thinkers and honest writers? Is Jewish creativity related to Jews historically being outside the mainstream of the societies in which Jews have lived? Is the experience of Jews in the United States different from experiences in the past?
6. On page 60, Coates states that “Hate gives identity.” What does he mean? How can we make sense of this bold statement in the context of our identities as Americans? As Jews?
7. Coates writes: “But whether you fought or ran, you did it together....” (page 69) The Talmud teaches, “All Israel are responsible for one another...” (Shavuot 39a) Is this similar to what Coates is saying? What does he mean about African Americans growing up in the poorest communities in America? Do American Jews have this “thick” sense of group? Has a sense of group identity changed for American Jews over time?
8. Coates says on page 69 that “...the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning.” What is he talking about here? *Israel* means to struggle with God. Is this the same type of struggle to which Coates refers, or a different one? What is the meaning in struggle?
9. “Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about his world is meant to be.” (page 71) What is Coates saying? What does he mean that “the god of history is an atheist?” Is the Jewish God of history an atheist? What does a God have to believe in?
10. How might the passage in question 9 be related to the biblical notion that human history takes place outside of the Garden—that we were banished from the Garden? What takes place in Genesis 4:8 and how many verses are we removed from the Garden?
11. Coates writes that “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*.” (page 103) How do you, as a Jew, an American, etc., understand that sentence? What is our Jewish mandate to respond? How might it inform our Passover?
12. Consider this passage from *Between the World and Me*:

I bumped into a young black man and said, ‘My bad.’ Without even looking up he said, ‘You straight.’ And in that exchange there was so much of the private rapport that can only exist between two particular strangers of this tribe we call black. (pp119-120)

Now compare it to the following excerpt from Ze’ev Maghen’s *New Essays on Zionism*:

I was in New York with my brother...we stopped to rest near the World Trade Center...Alex and I switched to Hebrew...as we were talking, this be-suited fellow...rose, walked over, and stood ...in front of our bench....‘Um..uh..*Shalom!*’ I extended my hand and he shook it...What he really wanted to say was: ‘Hey—I’m Jewish, too.... I embrace you, my brother...we share something tremendous...ancient...wonderful...’” (from “Imagine: On Love and Lennon” by Ze’ev Maghen in *New Essays on Zionism* edited by David Hazony, Yoram Hazony and Michael Oren p288)

Are Coates and Maghen having the same experience? Have you had this experience? Is it a minority experience? What does it mean or indicate?

13. Coates says that “In America, the injury is not in being born with darker skin, with fuller lips, with a broader nose but in everything that happens after.”(p120) What is he saying here?
14. One of the most famous pieces in American Civil Rights History is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written in 1963. [Read it](#) and compare King’s message with Coates. How far have we come in the past 50 years? What work is yet to be done? What power or message is conveyed by composing both of these texts in the form of a letter?
15. The title of Coates’s book comes from [a poem by Richard Wright](#) that recounts a lynching. Think about how the title relates to Coates’s argument and then read the poem. Why might Coates have chosen this name for his book? What understanding can we gain by reading these texts side-by-side?
16. What do you take away from the book? What should our response be as readers? As a Jewish community?
17. In what ways does this book inform or change your understanding of the events that have taken place in the past months from Ferguson to Baltimore and all around the country?
18. How can we bring the ideas and lessons of this book to bear in the Reform Movement’s campaign to advance racial justice?