



Jewish community still striving to make good on racial justice pledges year after George Floyd murder

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(JTA) — One of the first things the Jewish Federations of North America did in the days after George Floyd was murdered was offer a job to Isaiah Rothstein.

JFNA is a multibillion-dollar nonprofit working to represent hundreds of local Jewish community organizations across the United States and Canada. And Rothstein is a Black rabbi long active on Jewish diversity issues.

As the newly minted rabbinic scholar and public affairs advisor at JFNA, Rothstein was asked to steer the organization's equity, diversity and inclusion work. Over the past year, JFNA diversity initiatives have reached 30,000 employees at Jewish organizations and community members across 170 organizations including synagogues, day schools and senior living facilities, according to Rothstein. JFNA also launched Moed, a network for Jews of color, and Kamochah, a gathering of Black Orthodox Jews.

Rothstein said he was heartened by the response he had seen from the Jewish world to the national movement for racial equity that grew in the wake of Floyd's death.

"There is no question that within the past year there has been a consciousness shift," Rothstein said. "As Jews, this became our moment to step up."

But he said he would for now hold out judgment about whether American Jews had met the moment.

"Measuring success is the million-dollar question, and it's really hard to define," he said. "You must still be engaging in these conversations years from now. The work must be ongoing. I know we want to solve racism today but we are on a generational timeline."

Rothstein's organization was not the only one in the Jewish world to run headlong into diversity efforts in response to Floyd's death and the movement it ignited. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency spoke to a dozen professionals working to combat racism in the Jewish community, mostly Jews of color, and many said they have seen progress in the increased willingness to have uncomfortable conversations and to listen to people of color, whether Jewish or not. But they also said a year of intense effort is not enough to create the enduring changes that are needed in American Jewish communities.

"The educator in me is very excited about all the things people are doing to raise awareness. Everyone has a book or is listening to a podcast or is part of an awareness group," said Yavilah McCoy, a Black Jew who is the CEO of Dimensions, a consultancy on racial justice issues.

But she said the activist in her wants to see deeper changes, backed up by a reallocation of resources — and she's not sure those are underway.

"Many people believe that the best way to bring about change is to put Jews of color on their board and a lot of people have done that," she said. "What they haven't done, necessarily, is to go back and look at

their institutional history and examine the conditions that created a white-dominated social justice and broader Jewish institutional environment.

“Accountability is a very Jewish thing. With teshuva, you have to name the harm and go back to the person you have harmed,” McCoy said. “Our historic practice of signing onto letters rings hollow if it is not followed by investment in changing systems.”

Jewish institutions began assessing themselves when, just over a year ago, a police officer in Minneapolis murdered George Floyd, and the video of it was so horrific that it galvanized much of the country to confront the legacy of American racism.

The Jewish community was among the chorus of voices that spoke up in the wake of Floyd’s death. Organizations representing virtually every Jewish constituency — from Orthodox to the Reconstructionist movement, from the Anti-Defamation League to Hillel — released statements that attempted to reckon with this historic moment.

Within days, 130 Jewish organizations signed a letter pledging to fight “systemic racism.”

An even larger Jewish coalition came together at the one-month mark of the murder, declaring that “the Black Lives Matter movement is the current day civil rights movement in this country, and it is our best chance at equity and justice.”

The list of more than 600 organizations that signed the Black Lives Matter letter, which eventually appeared as a full-page ad in the New York Times, was said to be so comprehensive that it represented the stance of a majority of American Jewry.

Far more than a condemnation of racism, the letter contained a promise to take action: “Jewish tradition teaches us that justice is not something that will be bestowed upon us, it is something that we need to pursue, and that the pursuit is itself sacred work,” it said.

Even organizations that didn’t sign the letter, including JFNA, chose to take action. Rothstein said he saw his job offer as a symbol of a heartfelt commitment by the organization’s leadership, an invitation to instigate real change around racial equity.

The murder of George Floyd was also a watershed moment for interactions between the Jewish community with other groups and led to widespread enthusiasm about state and national policy reform, said Melanie Roth Gorelick, a senior vice president at the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

Gorelick said she could trace change in the community’s reaction to JCPA’s campaign for criminal justice reform, which had become a focus starting in 2016. The campaign targets biased policing, impunity for bad behavior by cops and the nation’s high incarceration rates.

“Up until Floyd’s death we did receive some pushback,” she said. “People asked why is the Jewish community involved in this? Is this a Jewish issue? What does this mean for our security needs?”

Afterward, JCPA was flooded with requests by Jewish leaders to be involved, according to Gorelick. The central message to seekers, she said, was an encouragement to listen to and learn from people of color and engage with them on issues. This attitude saw full expression at the JCPA’s recent annual conference, where racial justice was presented as an utmost Jewish issue.

There were workshops on voting rights, Black-Jewish relations and mass incarceration, and a keynote speech from Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock.

One person who took special notice of these themes at the conference was Carin Mrotz, the executive director of Jewish Community Action. A longtime voice for racial justice, Mrotz's organization is based in Minneapolis, where Floyd was killed, and played a special role in responding to events.

"To see JCPA, which has historically been more conservative say, actually, we have to move on racial justice for me was heartening," she said.

The energy was widely felt. Hillel, which serves Jewish students on college campuses, created two staff positions to focus on diversity equity and inclusion work. Hundreds of Hillel staff and student leaders have undergone training on racial justice by outside experts, according to chief experience officer Mimi Kravetz, who also said Hillel set up a network for about 100 Jewish students of color from campuses across the country.

"As a movement, we are reflecting on the ways that our identities impact us in the world and raising awareness about systemic racism," Kravetz said.

Jewish institutions' diversity efforts may have compounded one problem that Jews of color have long identified: that they too often feel called upon to speak for an entire community. There's a sense that the push to increase awareness and respond rapidly to calls for diversity may end up placing an unfair burden on Jews of color who work at Jewish institutions.

Ginna Green, a Black and Jewish anti-racism consultant, recalled a recent period in which every day seemed to produce another email or phone call from a Jew of color feeling alienated.

"I had a JoC professional come with varying degrees of frustration, pain and anger with their organizations, and talking about leaving," Green said. "What that means to me is that we still have a lot of work to do as a community."

McCoy, of Dimensions, said she sees a limitation in how the Jewish community is spending philanthropic dollars to address racial equity, especially as compared to the wider nonprofit world. In the United States as a whole, charitable giving for racial justice is increasingly going directly to impacted communities or organizations run by people of color. Not so much in the Jewish world, according to McCoy.

"The majority of our investments have been made to white-majority organizations to do awareness work and to organize new relationships with Jews of color," she said. "As a result, there is not much investment in Jew of color-led communities."

The dollar amounts flowing to different initiatives are not yet public, making it difficult to corroborate McCoy's impressions with data. But with her two decades of advising the Jewish world on issues of race and contacts through the community, McCoy says she is well situated to know and secure enough in her profession to speak up.

"I am the address for a lot of people seeking training and advice, and I am also an organizer of many Black-Jewish-led initiatives that need to do fundraising," she said.

Already, signs of tension have emerged as Jewish organizations balance their commitments to racial equity against other values. In Boston, the Jewish Community Relations Council, which signed the Black Lives Matter letter last summer, considered ejecting a member group that the council concluded "elevated white supremacists' voices" on Twitter. But in the end, the council's members voted to let the group remain because of its history of involvement and significance to members of Boston's Jewish community.

Now one looming question is how long and thoroughly Jewish organizations will sustain a focus on racial equity. The one-year anniversary of Floyd's murder came amid a flareup in violence in Israel and incidents of antisemitism at home, both drawing attention from what might have been a moment of

reflection and, for some, threatening to reinvigorate concerns about the Black Lives Matter movement that many Jewish groups overcame last year.

For people involved in efforts to get Jewish groups tackling racial equity issues, short-term diversions are not surprising — and last year’s public declarations of support give them confidence for the future.

“It was important to get these different Jewish institutions to put their feelings in writing, to sign their name to it so that this was not a fleeting feeling but something that translates into a political commitment,” said Dove Kent of Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, who helped organize the Black Lives Matter letter.

Another letter, signed by a smaller but still significant swath of the Jewish world, outlined seven detailed, concrete obligations.

Titled “Not Free to Desist,” this letter was put together by an ad hoc trio of Jews of color. They included a deadline in their racial justice pledge. At least four of the seven obligations had to be fulfilled by June 19 of this year, and all seven within three years.

The list includes ensuring at least 20% percent of an organization’s board members are people of color, terminating contracts with police departments and supporting the creation of a new Jewish body with a budget of at least \$1.5 million that would, among other things, hold the Jewish community accountable to its racial justice goals.

The organizers of the letter said it’s too early to calculate exactly how well signatories are doing on their pledges but that a survey to find out is being prepared.

“While there has been some positive progress across the landscape, including increased support for JOC led spaces inside the Jewish community broadly, we also see many organizations confronting the reality that achieving the racial justice commitments we laid out in the Not Free to Desist letter will require a sustained commitment over many years,” the organizers said in a statement.