

Eric Ward's Presentation to JCPA on How the Jewish Community Can Navigate the Current Political and Social Moment

This talk was edited for length

The last time we had a conversation (on BLM and Israel/antisemitism) like this may have been back around 2016 when the Movement for Black Lives issued a statement that I felt overly focused on Israel. I know others did as well. I certainly offered a critique, but I thought it was the start of a really important conversation within the Black and the Jewish community. If nothing else, I'm grateful that that conversation continues to happen, largely led by Jews of Color. That conversation needs to continue.

We are now all aware of the protests that have been happening around the country, which are really an expansion of the Movement for Black Lives and Black Lives Matter. There has been wrestling and confusion within the Jewish community around what it should do in this moment and how it should lean. I want to share three reflections:

1. You hear lots of terms - Movement for Black Lives, Black Lives Matters, Defund the Police, hashtags, organizations, leaders. What's important to realize is that the movement is a big, very loose network of individuals and activists from around the country. It involves both individuals and organizations and there are lots of varying opinions within the movement. What's important for us to understand is we should eschew drawing broad brush strokes about what the Movement for Black Lives believes or doesn't believe. When you see those broad strokes being painted, we have to look upon them with a bit of suspicion. Within that larger Movement for Black Lives is an organization called Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matters is a significant entity that was started by three African American women, one of whom is a Jew of Color. That organization has no policy on Israel and Palestine. People are often confusing hashtags with organizations and networks, and it's leading us to conclusions that could damage the work of building a 21st century Civil Rights movement that centers the Jewish and black community in the United States. A movement that understands the importance of not only taking on racism but also antisemitism. I'm not saying don't have critiques, don't have hard questions, and don't hold us accountable. I'm saying don't buy into the idea that there's one concentrated leadership or organization that is speaking on behalf of everyone. That's just not the case.
2. It's important to understand that antisemitism is still very real in our society. Many of you have heard me say there's no such thing as right-wing or left-wing antisemitism, there is merely antisemitism in America and how political movements sometimes intentionally or unintentionally tap into it. I don't believe that White Nationalists created antisemitism, nor do I think the left or Black Lives Matter created antisemitism. They are merely drawing on antisemitism that exists in society. And some organizations and individuals across the political spectrum sometimes tap into that antisemitism for lots of different reasons. The White Nationalist movement has tapped into antisemitism to create an environment of violence. In our critiques of our own movement--our own social equity spaces--we should not forget even as we strive to hold one another accountable, the real measurable danger right now are individuals who are using antisemitism to fuel violence. And not simply violence against Jewish communities such as Tree of Life but using it to fuel violence that targets people of color such as the mass shootings in El Paso, such as

the black church shootings in Charleston that we just honored the three-year anniversary of. All of those acts of violence by the White Nationalists are driven by the idea they are in an existential war against the Jewish community. None of us should forget this reality, even as we argue and demand more from each other.

3. There is an opportunity that could be lost here. If we treat the Movement for Black Lives or Black Lives Matters as if they are David Duke and the Klan, if we treat the antisemitism that arises within that movement as if it's the same antisemitism that's arising from the White Nationalist movement, as if it has the same fervor, intensity and intention, we stand a chance of not only dividing the Jewish Community from the African-American community at a time we need to be tied to one another in common destiny, we could create an irreparable rift generationally within the Jewish community itself. It is important for us to understand that Black Lives Matters is the mantra for Civil Rights in the 21st century. It is a demand--whether you are a 72 year old white male in rural America facing employment discrimination as a veteran, or you are a 18 year old trans Latina woman facing discrimination in New York City--that all of us have the right to live, love, and work free from fear and bigotry. Black Lives Matter is simply a mantra that says if we lift up those who are most vulnerable in our society--who rate on every life scale in terms of health, education, employment, etc. on the bottom--that we lift all of ourselves up in in this moment. Your role in this moment is not to be an ally but to find your own skin in the game, to be a co-conspirator and a partner, to be in partnership in the struggle for civil rights. Something very significant is happening in our country. Some of it is horrifying and some of it is beautiful. As we deal with the horrors let us not forget that we need to tend to the beauty. That means entering into a courageous, curious conversations with one another that doesn't prevent us from finding ways forward. That doesn't provides excuses for us not to do anything, but provides an opportunity for us to dive in. That's really the curiosity that should be driving all of us right now. We must ensure that each community finds and leads its own skin in the game in this moment.

What Can We Do?

Work in Coalitions - This moment is an opportunity to reconstruct the 20th century civil rights movement. Historically this didn't happen without Black and Jews. We need to work together in coalitions. When you work in coalitions with diverse people you need to know when to draw the lines and to have courageous and uncomfortable conversations. These can more easily take place when you have built relationships working together around common goals.

Advocate Together for Policy Change - In the current Black Lives Matter movement are there at least 1 -3 policies that you can support and move on at the local and national level. Be in conversations and active in advancing these policies. When we support Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights Movement we can also push back on antisemitism. Listen to Jews of Color and let them lead.

Build Relationships Especially among Our Younger Generations - Understand the narrative on how we talk about the current civil rights movement and who is leading it. This is a diffuse movement and relationships are really important. Get to know people in our own community. As important as it is to have critical relationships with NAACP and Urban League it is also important to empower younger Black and Jewish people to have relationships where they don't exist. The Black Lives Matter movement is a social one where young people are planting themselves – black, white, Jewish, diverse faiths, etc. When we attack Black Lives Matter, we ostracize ourselves from our own younger generations.

How to Respond to Antisemitism in the BLM When it Occurs?

If there comes a moment where we have a fundamental agreement, then it is important that we have courageous conversations.

The current Black Lives Matter movement has no ideology that is the basis for antisemitism. However, the movement is diverse and diffuse and it reflects all levels of that diversity in America. Like sexism, racism it is for sure that antisemitism will be taped into unintentionally. This is an important moment where we most work against these prejudices together.

It is important that we do not hold Israel to another standard than we would hold other governments. People in America critique other governments all the time. However, if an unfair critique is made that makes you nervous and smacks of antisemitism then it is important to fight it where it appears.

The best way of doing this is:

- Stay engaged. Talking about antisemitism does get people to shift. It is important to explain that bringing antisemitism into BLM weakens the movement. We want a society where all people can live, love, and work without fear.
- Educate how antisemitism is driving violence in our country. There has been a large uptick in antisemitic violence and vandalism in the last 3 years, including violent murders in Jewish institutions such as the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and Poway. We must fight antisemitism and racism together as they interlinked.

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