

OPINION

# What we can and must do

By SUSAN ANTMAN

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Susan Antman

The devastating unrest taking place across our country at this time has brought the long-standing issue of racial injustice into sharper focus. Those of us at Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey join Jews across our community in asking what we can do together with the Black community to address this.

To say there are macro, micro, and nano levels to this question; long-, short-, and medium-range frameworks to consider; nuances to grapple with; and detours to avoid doesn't begin to capture the complexity and care needed to do the topic justice.

And therein is the key: Justice.

In the name of justice, we agree that as human beings:

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- racism is real;
- all people deserve equal civil and human rights;
- and the laws of this land must serve and protect us all.

In the name of justice, we agree that as Jews, our basic teachings include:

- the principle that God created man in his image;
- the commandment to love the stranger;
- and the lesson that every soul has value.

In the name of justice, we agree that as Jews, we know from history that:

- we are morally obligated to speak up when others are persecuted;
- marginalized groups must face hate together, as hate against one group spreads to others.

But here's one (of many) places where things get complicated: An increasingly popular buzz word in today's social justice circles is "intersectionality" — when two or more groups believe their movements share a narrative of dehumanization and oppression, and they band together. That sounds like a good thing, right?

It can be ... to the extent that intersectionality connotes partnership; for example, Federation has achieved inroads combating anti-Semitism — and Islamophobia — through efforts with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith leaders. This has led to increased security funding for Jewish and other faith communities, increased Holocaust education in public schools, greater bias training for law enforcement, and stronger support for one another in times of crisis.

Intersectionality becomes a concern, however, when the groups who band together omit context, apply false equivalencies or double standards, or bring their own biases to bear — resulting in troubling stances on, or behavior toward, Jews and Israel.

There is much the Jewish community can do to promote racial justice for our brothers and sisters of color — some of them Jewish, by the way. Federation has begun conversations with Black community leaders and these conversations can lead to a range of initiatives, perhaps some building on those we have already undertaken, such as:

- Jewish Federation supported expanded Law Enforcement Officer bias training to include anti-Black bias as well as anti-Semitism, as a sponsor of the Center for Holocaust, Human Rights & Genocide Education program;
- We have stood shoulder to shoulder with Black leaders through New Jersey's Interagency Task Force on Youth Bias, and the NJ Interfaith Advisory Council of the NJ Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness;
- Federation brings PJ Library's books featuring diverse characters, inter-cultural friendships, and stories about learning from others and respecting differences to children ages 6 months to 11 years old;
- Our panels with clergy and community leaders from other faiths and cultures, including our "Seeing Human" series, promote understanding and cooperation among different ethnic, religious, and racial groups to fight hate;
- and Federation's bias preparedness conference with the state attorney general's office, NJ Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, and the FBI included all communities.

Our parent organization, Jewish Federations of North America, remind us that for more than a century, Jewish federations have been the essential catalyst for building flourishing Jewish communities and supporting Jewish people in need locally and worldwide. The success of this mission has always depended on the strength of the civil societies in which we live — another reason we must address the real and legitimate concerns raised by communities of color and Jews of color about racial discrimination.

On June 3, Federation brought together hundreds of attendees on Zoom with rabbis and Black clergy to express support for ending racial injustice. Two days later, we followed up with rabbis and Black community leaders to continue the conversation.

On June 23, Federation's "Seeing Human" series continues virtually with a look at how Jewish and Black leaders joined forces in the civil rights movement, and how this history inspires today's renewed commitment to support each other in addressing bias.

As these conversations continue, we must be impeccable with our word.

Speaking for the Jewish community, we cannot promise what we cannot deliver — whether due to finite resources or because some racial justice rhetoric and actions toward Israel and Jews concern us.

Certainly, not everyone in the Black community opposes Israel's right to defend itself or its right to self-determination, nor do all Black Lives Matter chapters. As Jewish and Black communities join together in pursuing racial justice, we must ask each other hard questions, bring concerns out of the shadows, and speak truth. That is how respectful and trusting relationships are built.

Daunting? Perhaps. Complicated? For sure. But no one group targeted by bigotry or bias can fight hate on its own. Jews need allies in the Black community to fight anti-Semitism, and Blacks need Jews, just as Jews and Muslims and Christians of every color need each other and the LGBTQ+ community needs allies in other communities, and so on. We all need friends who are different from us but share in our humanity and aspirations.

There is sadly no shortage of resentment, misunderstanding, mistreatment, mistrust, labeling, blaming, and oversimplification between some of these groups, let alone between different factions of the Jewish community. But we can do better. And we must.

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