

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ON RACIAL INEQUITY

**“The Warmth of Other Suns”**

by Isabel Wilkerson

**Reading and Reflection Guide**  
for Book Clubs and Individuals



**Presented by**



JEWISH COMMUNITY  
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# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

The focus of this ongoing programming is to shine a light on the deep-seated and structural racism, specifically against Black people, being perpetrated in communities across Connecticut and the nation.

Genocide is part of our history, and stories of escape, survival, determination and assimilation – like those in Wilkerson’s book – are passed down through generations. We can listen with empathy, react from a place of knowledge, and mourn together for lost branches of our family trees. We can be helpers and supporters to our Black community members and neighbors.

The first book in our series, “The Warmth of Other Suns” by Isabel Wilkerson, is about the Great Migration. As Wilkerson puts it, “This book... is about all migrations. It’s really about how all of us came to be in this place, on this soil, in this land at this time.... It’s a story of universal longing, fortitude, and courage that was necessary for someone in all of our backgrounds to have done what the people in this book did just for us to be here today. Someone in all of our backgrounds had to do what the people in this book did just for many of us to exist.... That is the power of a single decision, and that is essentially what this book is about: the power of a single decision to change a country.”

## DISCUSSION PROTOCOLS

### Goals

1. Provide a safe space to read about, discuss, and process racial inequity
2. Learn how to recognize our own biases on an individual level and racial inequity on a societal level
3. Learn about the broad spectrum of privilege and how society benefits certain groups over others
4. Learn how anti-racism is an active and conscious effort to work against systemic racism
5. Discuss the work that we can do as individuals and as a community to dismantle these systematic structures of racism

## Norms

- Stay engaged: Staying engaged means “remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved in the dialogue.”
- Be willing to be uncomfortable: People of color experience the discomfort of racism daily, often multiple times a day. Discomfort is inevitable, especially in discussions about race. Make a commitment to bring issues into the open and to be an ally to Jews of color and people of color when they bring them forward.
- Speak your truth.
- Expect and accept nonclosure: Try to “hang out in uncertainty” and not rush to quick solutions, especially in relation to racial understanding, which requires ongoing dialogue.
- Be willing to engage in an examination of your own thinking, understanding, knowledge, and assumptions, and consider that it represents one of many ways of knowing.
- Be conscious not to shift attention away from people and situations that are negatively impacted by systems of oppression.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Motivations to leave

- What motivated Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster to leave the South? What circumstances and motivations prompted them to undertake such a difficult and dangerous journey? What might their fates have been if they had remained in the South instead?
- How are the motivations for this migration similar to those of Jewish populations in the 19th and 20th centuries? How are they different?
- While Robert Foster had his sights set on a life in California, his brother Madison believed, “running away meant Jim Crow had won, and Madison wasn’t going to give the rascals that.” Discuss the Black Americans who chose to stay in the South, and the conflict people face when they must choose between possibility and what they know. Can you think of similar situations in Jewish history?
- Wilkerson writes that “across the South, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929” (p. 39). Public lynching is looked back upon with disgust as a barbaric act. What actions today will people look back upon in a hundred years as barbaric or inhumane?

- What were the most horrifying conditions of the Jim Crow–era South? What instances of racial terrorism stand out most strongly in the book? What daily injustices and humiliations did Black people have to face there? Compare these to the circumstances preceding other human migrations.
- What do you think makes some people stay and continue to experience unimaginable trauma and others flee in search of refuge and asylum? Can you understand both ways of thinking?

## Destinations and arrivals

- In what ways did leaving the South free Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster?
- Wilkerson mentions “The Negro in Chicago” (p. 275), a report published in 1922 that included recommendations for improving race relations. The report was largely unheeded, according to Wilkerson. Are cities like Chicago still feeling the ripple effects of those unheeded recommendations? How did the conditions that Black American migrants faced affect urban race relations for decades to come? How does this compare with the inter-group relations experienced by other migrant groups, such as Irish, Latinx, Chinese and Japanese, Vietnamese and Cambodian, or Jewish?
- How did the Great Migration influence Northern culture? Consider blues music or the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.
- In considering American prejudices, what similarities and differences do you see between the experiences of Black American people and Jewish migrants?
- After being viciously attacked by a mob in Cicero, Illinois (a suburb of Chicago), Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “I have seen many demonstrations in the South, but I have never seen anything so hostile and so hateful as I’ve seen here today” (p. 389). Why were Northern working-class whites so hostile to Black migrants? How does this compare to the reception other migrants experience? What unique challenges did Black migrants face in the North? Compare these experiences to your own family’s experience.
- Each of Wilkerson’s protagonists sought out people they knew or who resembled them in their new communities. This is evident with other migrant communities. Why does this happen? Does this tendency reinforce stereotyping and prejudice, or does it help migrants acclimate to their new home? Is it more positive or negative in the long run?

## Debates and discussions

- How is reading this book a different experience from reading a straightforward history of the Great Migration? Have you read similar stories about other migrations? About Jewish migrations? If so, how did they affect you?
- What anecdote in “The Warmth of Other Suns” made the most lasting impression on you? Which of the three main characters had the most memorable narratives from your perspective? Do any of their stories resonate with your own family stories?
- What were the most surprising things you learned reading the book? Did it clear up any misconceptions for you?
- Near the end of the book, Wilkerson asks: “With all that grew out of the mass movement of people, did the Great Migration achieve the aim of those who willed it? Were the people who left the South—and their families—better off for having done so? Was the loss of what they left behind worth what confronted them in the anonymous cities they fled to?” (p. 528). What conclusions does Wilkerson reach about these questions? What conclusions do you reach?
- Wilkerson writes that, of her three subjects, “Ida Mae Gladney had the humblest trappings but was perhaps the richest of them all. She had lived the hardest life, been given the least education, seen the worst the South could hurl at her people, and did not let it break her.... Her success was spiritual, perhaps the hardest of all to achieve. And because of that, she was the happiest and lived the longest of them all” (p. 532). What attributes allowed Ida Mae Gladney to achieve this happiness and longevity? In what sense might her life, and the lives of George Starling and Robert Foster, serve as models for how to persevere and overcome tremendous difficulties?
- What practical strategies does this book suggest for addressing racism? How could we apply those strategies to our lives? To our Jewish community? How might we bring them to our community at large?
- Just as we open the door for Elijah at the Passover Seder, *to what* or *to whom* do you want to open the door in your *own* life this year? Do you have any fears about “opening the door”? If so, how might you overcome those fears?
- What does the story of the Great Migration mean for us today? How do we see it playing out in our lives and in the lives of others? What can we do to expand the good and minimize the negatives?

**Sources:** [Chicago Public Library](#). [Lit-Lovers](#), *Publisher’s Discussion Questions*, *HIAS Haggada 2021*

## JEWISH TEXT STUDY

### 1. Leviticus 19:16

לֹא תֵעָמֵד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ

*You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.*

It's one thing to intellectually understand the plight of others. However, this text commands us to take action. How can we fulfill that *mitzvah*, or commandment, in real-life situations? How can the white Jewish community walk alongside its Black siblings and neighbors without overshadowing their voices?

### 2. Leviticus 19:13

לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה אֶת-רֵעֶךָ וְלֹא תִגְזֹל לֹא-תִלְוֶיךָ שְׂעֵלַת שְׂכִיר אִתָּה עַד-בֹּקֶר:

*You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning.*

Throughout the book, we saw that Black migrants faced challenges attaining fair pay – and sometimes they faced challenges getting paid for their work at all. What responsibility do we have to stand up for marginalized populations' right to equal pay and equal access to opportunity? When we ourselves benefit from opportunity, how do we use it to help others?

### 3. Leviticus 19:18

לֹא-תִקֶּחַ וְלֹא-תִטֹּר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אָנֹכִי הוּא:

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the L-RD.*

Fear is one of the obstacles to treating people equally. How do we work through our own fears of the unknown to be able to treat people with dignity and respect? What are our pathways to learn about others and their history and culture in order to fear less? How can we help in building bridges and partnerships to reach these goals?

### 4. Leviticus 24:20

שֹׁבֵר תַּחַת לְשֹׁבֵר עֵינַי תַּחַת עֵינָיו שֹׁן תַּחַת שֹׁן כַּאֲשֶׁר יָתַן מוֹם בְּאָדָם כֵּן יִנָּתֵן לוֹ:

*...fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him.*

This verse isn't about retribution; it is meant to be a statement of equality for people. In other words, one person's injured eye is of the same value as any other's. This value was evident neither in the Jim Crow South nor in the cities of the Northern migration.

People accessed – or did not access - housing, employment, wages, etc. not based on their worth but, rather, based on the color of their skin. We can still see disparities like this today. How can we ensure that we are working to eliminate such disparities?

## 5. Exodus 12:49

תֹּרֶה אֶחָד יִהְיֶה לְאֻזְרַח וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

*There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.*

The text elevates the stranger to having the same rights as a citizen. In the book, the migrants were not strangers but citizens of the same country. It's clear that laws were different then. How about now? Have we progressed since the time of the Great Migration?

## 6. Kiddush

זְכֹר לִיְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם

*In memory of the exodus from Egypt...*

What is the power in remembering a time before you became free? Why would anyone want to remember the time before freedom and the first moments of freedom? How does remembering shape the way we tell our people's story?

## 7. "The New Colossus" by [Emma Lazarus](#)

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

This poem isn't specifically about the Black experience, but it evokes feelings that we can use to empathize with the Black experience. What might it say to you about the Great Migration?



## 8. *Die Goldene Medina* (Yiddish for “the golden land”)

Eastern European Jews fleeing the pogroms of their homeland referred to America as *die Goldene Medina*, a place where the streets were paved with gold. What similarities do you see between the great waves of Jewish immigration in the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Great Migration? What differences do you see? Think about access to employment, housing, social standing, acceptance by the Jewish and Black communities already living in “die Goldene Medina,” and how the newcomers were treated when they first arrived.

## 9. The power of song

Music has been a powerful form of expression for both Jews and the Black community. [This article](#) is about a Yiddish song that Black musicians *also* used to express their experiences in America. Why might the lyrics resonate with both groups?

## 10. The Great Migration, the Exodus, and Jewish immigration

In your opinion, is the Great Migration more like the Jews’ exodus from Egypt or more like the Jewish immigration from Europe before World War II? For each comparison, what similarities and what differences do you see? If we tap in to all three stories, how might that help us to move forward?

## ACTION STEPS

### How Jews can support racial justice

**Self-education.** Often, people don’t even realize their own preconceived biases. White Jews can start by educating themselves. See Additional Resources, below.

**Advocacy.** We can tell elected officials that we support policies to eliminate racism. For example:

- Contact your [state or federal legislators](#) (phone calls, emails, or letters are most effective)
- Visit your city or town website for municipal officials’ contact information (phone calls or emails are most effective)
- [Click here](#) for more information from the JCRC on effective advocacy

**Allyship.** When showing solidarity, white Jews should follow the lead of organizers of color. Just as Jews have the right to define anti-Semitism and to determine how we

want our partners to respond, people of color have the right to take the lead and determine the appropriate response to racism. White Jews should support their efforts. Recommended resources include:

- NAACP's [#WeAreDoneDying campaign](#)
- [Guidelines for Being Strong White Allies](#)

## Areas in which we can combat racial inequity

**Voting rights.** Voter suppression laws impact communities of color especially. We can advocate for policies that make it easier for all Americans to vote.

**Education.** Connecticut has one of the largest achievement gaps in the country. Promote diversity on your local board of education, and advocate for initiatives that help ensure equal access to high-quality education and facilities.

**Economic justice.** For most of U.S. history, housing and employment restrictions have targeted people of color. Advocate for policies that promote equitable access to housing and jobs.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Words to know

*Racism/Anti-racism* – We used to consider someone a racist if, for example, they supported the KKK. Today, it isn't enough merely to *not support* the KKK; one should use every opportunity to speak and work against it and its beliefs. Being passive or silent is to be complicit. To be anti-racist is to actively fight against racism. We are all obligated to actively watch and listen and object.

*White privilege* – Having white skin provides benefits, privileges one doesn't even notice or realize: easy entry to a movie theater, advancement on the job, ability to buy any home we can afford regardless of location, walking down the street without being looked at askance. These are passive advantages that come from the assumption that being white is the norm and being other is less.

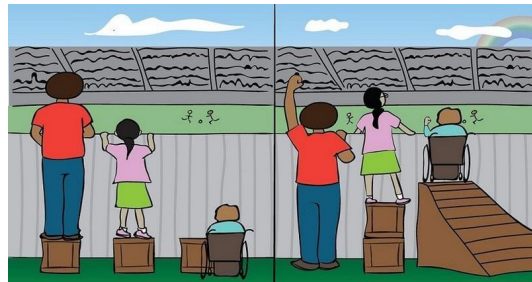
*White supremacy* – White supremacy is the old assumption that the white race and white culture are superior to all others. White supremacy today often also suggests that the "white race" is threatened with being overrun by people of other races and must fight to maintain its dominance. White supremacists have differing definitions of the white race. Some definitions include only those with so-called Aryan features (blond

hair, blue eyes, etc.) which generates the perception of threat from people who look different. Jews can see this in anti-Semitic assertions of “worldwide Jewish dominance.”

*Fragility* – Some white people become defensive when confronted with the notion that they may be racist or even benefit from racist societal systems. White people may think of themselves as *not* being racist, and they may try to assert that position in the face of challenges to their open-mindedness. This fragility prevents candid discussion of the issues and inhibits the progress of our entire society.

*Caste/class* – Caste and class both set people apart according to some set of criteria (e.g. heritage, ethnicity or race, economic status). Caste is innate and cannot be overcome or set aside. Conversely, one can “rise above” one’s class.

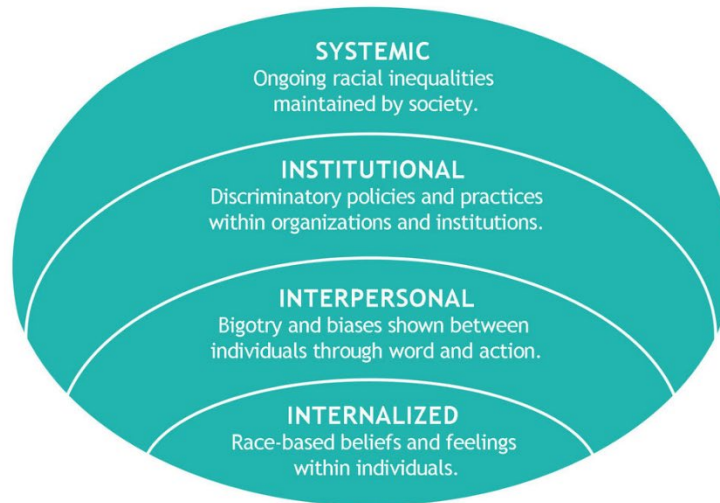
*Equality/equity* – Equality distributes advantages to all in the same amount. Equity distributes advantages *according to need*. Imagine three people trying to look over a 5’ fence. One of these people stands 6’ tall, one is 4’6” tall, and one sits in a wheelchair. Now imagine that each person has a 12”-high stepstool. Who benefits from this situation? If the situation were equitable, each person would have a stepstool or platform that allowed them to see over the fence.



*Systemic racism* – Systemic racism (also called *institutional* or *structural racism*) is embedded in our societal systems. One example is redlining, i.e., being denied a loan or insurance because you live in a “risky” neighborhood. Systemic racism perpetuates racism broadly and in ways we often do not see or realize. For instance, Black college students are more likely to be economically disadvantaged and they may not have easy access to the best interest rates, so they may need larger college loans and end up paying higher rates. This makes them likely to graduate from college with more debt than white students have. *Systematic racism*, on the other hand, is intentional, methodical, and approaches a task in an organized, step-by-step way.

*For more on these concepts, look for works by the authors Robin DiAngelo, Ibram X. Kendi, and Isabel Wilkerson.*

## LEVELS ON WHICH RACISM EXISTS



### Additional resources on the Great Migration

[Presentation and Q&A by Isabel Wilkerson](#) (Free Library of Philadelphia podcast)

Isabel Wilkerson TED Talk: [The Great Migration and the Power of a Single Decision](#)

"[Making a Way Out of No Way](#)," episode 4 from the series "The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross" with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

"[My True South: Why I Decided to Return Home](#)" by Jesmyn Ward (Time magazine)

"[We Need a Second Great Migration](#)" by Charles Blow (The New York Times)

"[Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series](#)" (The Phillips Collection)

### Additional resources on racial justice

#### Books and articles

"[How to Be an Antiracist](#)" by Ibram X. Kendi

"[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)" by Peggy McIntosh

"[Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents](#)" by Isabel Wilkerson

"[Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own](#)" by Eddie S. Glaude Jr.

[“White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism”](#) by Robin DiAngelo

[“Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption”](#) by Bryan Stevenson

[“The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness”](#) by Michelle Alexander

ADL’s [“Talking to Young Children about Bias and Prejudice”](#)

## **Videos**

[“The 13th,”](#) a film by Ava DuVernay (full film available on Netflix)

[“Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue: Addressing Racial Inequality”](#) with CT State Treasurer Shawn Wooden (Federation and ADL Connecticut webinar, June 10, 2020)

[“Race and Privilege: A Panel with Local Leaders”](#) (JCRC webinar, August 17, 2020)

[“How to Talk to Kids & Teens about Hate”](#) (JCRC and JTConnect webinar, November 10, 2020)

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