



OTHER VIEWPOINTS

Voices on Jewish topics from St. Louis and beyond

Long after the news cycle ends, hard work of fighting hatred will continue

BY TONY WESTBROOK, JR.

Over the past 48 hours, my social media outlets have blown up over recent anti-Semitic comments made by an Eagles footballer, DeSean Jackson. I have seen many of my white Jewish colleagues, students, friends and public leaders come out publicly denouncing and calling out the anti-Semitic comments. I am not here to defend the anti-Semitic comments made by yet another public figure. As a Jew and a Black man in America, I know firsthand what baseless hatred can do and continues to do here in America and elsewhere.

The remarks made by this football player are disgusting and inappropriate. Anyone who chooses to use their voice in this manner should be called out, invited to do the difficult inner-work to address why they made such comments, and do work in the community to fix the damage and pain inflicted.

What I am challenged by in this moment is how vocal many of my white Jewish colleagues, students, friends and public leaders have been in the last 48 hours than they have been in the past six weeks with protests, racial unrest, police brutality, the murder of more Black and Brown people, the murder of more trans and other queer folk, and unfortunately, this list goes on and on.

In many of the posts or statements that I've seen, many people used phrases such as "To all my Black friends and leaders, your silence right now speaks volumes..." or "To all my friends who have become social justice activists on Instagram over the past few months: Where is your voice today? Where is your condemnation of blatant, public anti-Semitism?" Many have used Martin Niemöller's famous quote, "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

Tony J. Westbrook, Jr. is a Jewish African-American activist, and community leader from St. Louis working to address issues of racial inequality, discrimination, diversity and inclusion throughout the St. Louis community. He received his B.A. in Communication from Fontbonne University and then studied at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies. He graduated in May 2019 with a Certificate in Jewish Studies and a Certificate in Jewish Experiential Education. He was recently named a fellow in Yeshivat Hadar's Jewish Wisdom Fellowship.



And some comments were far more intense and offensive to share here. Many called out the entire Black community and Black leaders specifically to speak up, invoking that old relationship of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Somehow, these statements implicated me in the anti-Semitism that exists in parts of the Black community and also ignored my existence as a Jew of color.

Here's the thing: racism, specifically anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism in America are linked! Hitler and his evil party were inspired by the Jim Crow laws and practices in America and based the Nuremberg Laws off of them. Both Blacks and Jews were historically prohibited from joining white social clubs, fraternities and sororities and other organizations (which is why both groups have their own). The two most hated groups in America for years, were Black people and Jewish people.

The anti-Black racism is entrenched in every aspect of American life and culture whereas anti-Semitism isn't systemic in the same way. That is not to say that organizations and individuals don't have anti-Semitic practices or beliefs, it isn't systemic in America the way racism against Black people is. That does not make one form of hate more important or less important than another. Hate is Hate.

The reality today is many Jewish peo-

ple in America are white or white-passing and benefit from a system that values and elevates whiteness. It is an uncomfortable truth to hear, but it is true. I will never be white, but I will always be Black and Jewish. The history and relationship between the Black community and the Jewish community is a complex, sometimes strained one and I have feet in both worlds.

I share these thoughts because it is a particularly hard moment for me as a Black man and as a Jew in America. It is painful every time there's a video of another Black or Brown person being killed at the hands of those tasked to protect us. It is painful every time a swastika is painted on another synagogue or a public figure says some off-the-wall comment or an online retailer takes Black garb or Jewish garb and makes it into some super insensitive and offensive jewelry.

The point is that we all have a part to play. Only calling out issues that affect your particular group when something happens to your group doesn't do much.

In order for us all to move forward, we need to start with ourselves and do the hard work of acknowledging our own racist, anti-Semitic, and biased views and practices. Educate ourselves on why we have them, then, as my mother says, "once you know better, you do better."

Call in your racist family members and friends. Call in people who are making anti-Semitic jokes, comments, posts. Stop participating in cancel culture because systems don't change and people don't change when we simply cancel them and don't hold them accountable. Hold your leaders accountable—whether they be your rabbi, your preacher, your senator, your imam, your boss, and everyone in between—hold them accountable.

This work isn't easy. No one ever said it would be. Change will only come once we've rolled up our sleeves, grabbed an ally or two, and get to work.

Eradicating hate, racist systems, anti-Semitism, discrimination, homophobia—is always trending. It is always en vogue.

D'VAR TORAH

Comforting the afflicted is the duty of us all

BY RABBI LANE STEINGER

"To comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

I was in a rabbinical school class when I first heard this adage. The saying was proffered by a professor as a working definition of Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible — or TaNaK (an acronym for the Bible's three components: Torah, Nevi'im [Prophets] and Ketuvim [Writings]).

Upon further review, I learned from my own research outside the classroom that "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" originated at the turn of the 20th century with American humorist Finley Peter Dunne. In one of his syndicated newspaper columns, Dunne was describing the duties of journalism and the press. In the mid-1940s, a minister in western Pennsylvania expropriated Dunne's catchphrase to depict religion, in general, and religious institutions and clergy, specifically.

By the time I was a rabbinic student, "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" was being quoted not only in reference to Hebrew Prophecy, but also by some to define the rabbinate.

During the annual 2½-month period from the partial fast of Shiva Asar B'Tammuz, the 17th Day of Tammuz, which recalls the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem leading to the destruction of the Temple, to Rosh Hashana, our Shabbat Haftarah readings, the lections from the Prophets, reflect the prophetic propensity to chasten or to comfort.

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LETTERS

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ers have. We cannot be silent watching great American history being attacked and monuments being destroyed by mob action or mob hysteria. And we cannot be silent when the police officers that keep American streets safe are humiliated.

Wake up, all ye who believe that the events of the Old World will turn out differently in the United States.

Lena Fish
St. Louis

Response to editorial

Regarding the June 19 editorial, "Defund, Defend, Define" highlighting the number of cases of police brutality that have occurred across the nation in the past several months. First allow me to say how deplorable I find these miscarriages of justice to be.

Having said that, however, the thought of defunding police departments entirely, or in great measure, is certainly not the answer and is counterproductive.

I can unequivocally say that the over-

whelming majority of police officers in our nation do an exceptional job to serve and protect, and are the epitome of honesty, integrity and decency, putting their lives on the line for the public every day.

Unfortunately, there are those officers who fail miserably to uphold the highest standard and quality of law enforcement. These men and women must be weeded out and punished to the fullest extent of the law when they dishonor their badge and commit egregious crimes, which has occurred too often recently.

Police training needs to be upgraded and policies enforced vigorously so that law enforcement is the very best it can be while protecting the rights of all citizens. We are a nation of laws and must never lose sight of that hallowed and never-ending principle.

Gene Carton
University City

A 'misguided and disturbing' commentary

Even though Marty Rochester is a friend and a colleague, his July 15 commentary ("Let us reason together to defeat the pan-

demical") was so misguided and disturbing that I felt obliged to reply.

Let me start with the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be clear to everyone now that there should be no debate between fighting the pandemic or restarting the economy. Without the pandemic under control, it is impossible to restart the economy. President Donald Trump's decision to prematurely open up the economy was solely based on his mistaken idea that this decision would benefit him politically. My guess is that this year more than 100,000 Americans will prematurely die due to that decision. May I encourage Rochester to look at the three pages of obituaries in the last edition of the *Jewish Light*; in normal times, there is usually less than a page.

More significantly, it is now apparent that virtually every decision Trump makes is solely based on his political benefit, even if it is not in our country's interest. This includes his extortion of Ukraine, his request for political help from China, his withdrawal of troops from Syria, and his deal with the Taliban. How about his embrace of the Confederate Battle flag, the one that even the state of Mississippi has now decided to remove from its state flag? How about

his racism and race baiting, when so many Americans are marching for racial justice? And Rochester finds that the Democratic Party "more odious" than Donald Trump? Unbelievable.

Bernard J. Feldman
Creve Coeur

Reader responds to recent letter

I have to respond to the July 1 letter titled "President deserves credit for Israel support." Look at President Donald Trump's history while in office. In a few short months he has made the United States a laughingstock in the eyes of the world. If he does anything for Israel, it's solely to solidify his base. He is immoral and unjust when it comes to the plight of others. Trump is an unlearned racist who probably has never picked up a book to educate himself about Israel's lengthy and complex history. Please don't be fooled.

Melody Boime
Clayton

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