

Rabbi Joel Simon

Rosh Hashana Morning 5781 - Creating Cultural Humility in our World

Jemele Hill has been a columnist and reporter for ESPN since 2008. That year the Lakers were playing the Celtics in the NBA Finals, and Hill is a lifelong Pistons fan (which for those who don't know, inherently means that one is not a fan of the Celtics.) As she writes it twelve years later, she was "saddened... to see that the Celtics were no longer as widely hated as they had once been." And she wrote the following. "'Rooting for the Celtics is like saying Hitler was a victim.'"<sup>1</sup>

I can't, for the life of me, understand what Ms. Hill was trying to do here, any more than I can understand why DeSean Jackson, a Philadelphia Eagles Wide Receiver, tweeted on July 6th to his million and a half followers the following strange quote falsely attributed to Adolph Hitler. "Because the white Jews knows that the Negroes are the real Children of Israel and to keep America's secret, the Jews will blackmail America. They will extort America, their plan for world domination won't work if the Negroes know who they were." It's terrible, and it's so horribly bizarre and bizarrely horrible, that it's hard to know how to react. New England Patriots receiver Julian Edelman responded by inviting Jackson to the Holocaust Museum, adding that he would like to go to the National Museum of African American History and Culture with him as well. (I don't know if that trip occurred, but I hope it did.) I'll be honest. After first reading about Jackson's tweet, I didn't think I was going to respond. When I first saw it, I did the same thing I tell my B'nai Mitzvah students to do when a cell phone goes off during their service - ignore it, and keep going.

But Hill's article, along with another beautifully written piece by Kareem Abdul Jabbar, made me stop ignoring. Hill wrote the following. "Like Jackson, I am Black. And had anyone made a remark trivializing slavery, I

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/desean-jacksons-blind-spot-and-mine/614095/>

would have been incensed. I learned that just because I'm aware of the destruction caused by racism, that doesn't mean I'm automatically sensitive to other forms of racism, or in this case, anti-Semitism. Black people, too, are capable of being culturally arrogant."

Cultural arrogance is an expression I had not heard before. To Hill, it seems like cultural arrogance is placing one's own people's needs ahead of another's. She proposes that she was at risk of being more aware of a statement trivializing slavery than one trivializing the Holocaust because she is Black.

Two time Pulitzer Prize Winner Anthony Lewis defines cultural arrogance slightly differently. In a 1975 article explaining the problems with the way in which America was looking at the Vietnamese, he described Cultural Arrogance as, "an imperial assumption that by superiority or sheer power our way of life must prevail."<sup>2</sup> In his context, this was the American assumption that the Vietnamese would want Vietnam to be more like America.

But perhaps, cultural arrogance can play itself out differently. As I shared earlier, when I first read about Jackson's remarks, I disregarded them. He had seen something on another Twitter account, copied and pasted, or I guess "retweeted" is the correct term, and it was so ignorant that I didn't even need to bother with it. I wasn't going to let this take away from the progress being made right now in honest dialogue over the ways in which the atrocities of slavery are still affecting so many with black or brown skin today and how the relationship between the Black and Jewish communities could, perhaps, assist in that progress. "Afterall," I would say, "while we recognize that anti-Semitism is an extremely prevalent problem in today's world, because *my* family's skin was white we were able to jump certain hurdles much easier than those whose skin was not." But as someone who usually tries very hard to use "yes, and" rather than "but," my "while" had

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/12/archives/cultural-arrogance.html>

served as a “but,” and in my defense of a desire to support this movement, I had discounted a very real threat to my own people. In a strange form of cultural arrogance, I think too many people decided to disregard this; if on the one hand we are going to say that sports stars should have a voice, I believe that means that they should be responsible with that voice, just as anyone with over a million people listening to him or her should be responsible with his or her voice. The words Desean Jackson shared with one and a half million followers are dangerous words, and I had subconsciously assumed that my people, the Jewish people, were solidly grounded enough that I didn’t have to worry about us, at least not in this instance, and I was wrong.

What Jackson had tweeted, regardless of who said it, and regardless of what he thought it meant, put the current challenges of the Black community on the backs of the Jewish people, and that is the kind of anti-Semitic rant, along with former NBA player and current sportscaster Stephen Jackson’s twitter response to a follower talking about the Rothschilds’ control of banks - that is the kind of anti-Semitic rant that helped lead Hitler to power almost 100 years ago. I am using my voice this morning to suggest that we can’t tolerate it from sports stars, we can’t tolerate it from politicians, we can’t tolerate it from anyone.

Yes, and...

It always comes back to Hillel, author of the ultimate “Yes, and” wisdom - If I’m not for myself who will be for me; if I’m only for myself what am I. There’s a reason we always go back to it. It is the constant reminder that I don’t need a “but,” when I look at the world. I need a, “yes, and.”

If I am not for myself, who will be for me. Civil unrest is rarely good for the Jews. Anti-semitism most often comes from those who are hurting the most seeing *Jews* as the ones who are holding them down; this anti-semitism can be extremely dangerous, and we cannot ignore it, even if we view

another's problems to currently be greater than our own. Or perhaps especially when we view another's problems to be greater than our own. If we ignore the fire in the corner, it will spread.

*And*, if I'm only for myself what am I. Civil unrest is caused by lack of hope. We are not responsible for the lack of hope, but we have to be a part of bringing that hope back. There are a lot of people who are suffering in our country, regardless of race or religion, and there are a lot of things that hold people back from achieving all that they'd be able to achieve in different circumstances, *and* it is unconscionable and unacceptable that having skin color that is not white still creates the stumbling blocks it continues to create today. My grandparents - two WWII refugee immigrants, one in retail the other a seamstress, saved everything so they could buy a house in the suburbs where they were able to gain equity. That equity that would help support my dad so he could support himself and support me; that house would be my family's inheritance that gave me a boost as I went to college and later prepared to purchase my first home; My grandparents could only afford that house in the 1950's because they were given a mortgage. At the same time my grandparents had their mortgage approved, banks were systematically *denying* mortgages in growing black neighborhoods. I'll post a clip from the documentary Blacks and Jews to our Facebook page after the service, describing one neighborhood, Lawndale, in Chicago, and the disturbing history of black families manipulated and cheated as they moved into this predominantly Jewish area<sup>3</sup> and the rabbi who fought against it. The inability for so many families to build that same kind of support system led to setback after setback, and there were countless other hurdles that led to other setbacks, and the effects of those setbacks are still felt by too many today. And that's just one small piece of a large, intricate puzzle.

I would like to believe that we, as Jews, are commanded to stand up for the statement that Black Lives Matter, *and* I understand those who are

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<sup>3</sup> <https://vimeo.com/227159965>

challenged by the movement, fearing both anti-Semitic and anti-Israel rhetoric. The platform of the Movement for Black Lives, an organization affiliated with Black Lives Matter, states, ““The U.S. justifies and advances the global war on terror via its alliance with Israel and is complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people.”

Jamile Hill’s quote was a flippant attempt at a joke that displayed an implicit bias. Desean Jacskon’s quote was ignorant hate and irresponsible use of an anti-semitic trope; This statement contained a thought out, contrived lie that took the word that was created to describe the atrocity against us to unfairly compare the Jewish state to the Nazi one. It is ok to be critical of Israel and fight for change in Israel; it is anti-semitic to place the entire conflict on Israel’s back.

Hill suggests that, “Black people’s fight for their humanity is unrelated to Jackson’s error, but they must use their own racial experiences to foster empathy for others... The thirst for liberation and equality can never come at the expense of dehumanizing other marginalized groups”

As the leaders of Movement for Black Lives, in such a flawed way, tried to show empathy for another, this anti-semitic critique of Israel dehumanizes and marginalizes Jews in return, and the result is the growth and spread of an extremely dangerous, hateful lie.

There are a lot of things in the statement of the Movement for Black Lives with which I do not agree, and there are many actions that are being committed in the name of Black Lives Matter that we all agree should be condemned, and just as that small minority of Chicago Jews who took advantage of Black families who wanted to live in the suburbs did not represent the Jewish community as a whole, this small segment should not keep us from continuing the historic Jewish role in the Civil Rights Movement.

When we disagree with our fellow human, but we agree that all humanity is created in God's image and strive to love our neighbors as ourselves, we make that the starting point, find more common values, and try to work out our differences from there so we can work together toward those common values.

There are lots of areas in our lives where we should look at our neighbor with whom we disagree and say, let's start with the values that shape our lives, find the ones we have in common, and try to learn about why we have differences from there, so we can work together to further our common values. Maybe if there were more conversations like that, there would be a lot less division in our world. I would love to make some Zoom or phone coffee dates with anyone who would like to help me practice this kind of conversation.

In Ms. Hill's apology for her 2008 column, she ended by saying, "I'm not going to stop writing about race. It's just that the next time I do, I'll be carrying an enhanced perspective." It's clear she has that perspective now, and I wish more people who tweeted, posted, commented, and shared their voice with either millions or tens would strive for that enhanced perspective. I hope that I can appreciate more nuance in the way in which I approach this discussion moving forward, and I pray that our community and the greater community can show concern for ourselves and concern for others without discounting either.

I am extremely proud of our congregant and President of the Tampa JCCs and Federation, Joe Probasco, who has worked with the Tampa City Council in writing and passing a Race Reconciliation Resolution, apologizing for the slavery and discrimination that is a part of Tampa history, and promising to work toward combating the remaining negative effects and promoting racial and social equity. This is a step in the right direction on so many levels and makes Tampa a model to the rest of our country - Thank you Joe. Our own Lauren Jaffe and Mike Deeson, hosts

of the amazing podcast, the Third Opinion, which you all should subscribe to right now, have also been leaders in this discussion, and I'm honored to have worked with them on two panel discussions educating our community about other steps that can be taken to improve our current situation. Both are available on our YouTube page. Joe, Mike, Laureen, and so many of our congregants who are elected officials and community leaders are working with so many others to make real, practical change in *our* community without letting national movements blur the true goals, and they are creating relationships and connections that will only strengthen our greater community as a result. *That* is a conversation that I want to be a part of.

This morning we read the story of the Akeidah, Abraham preparing to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice before an angel stops him at the last moment before blade met skin, telling Abraham to offer a ram caught in the thicket instead. The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel tells in his autobiography of how he, as a seven year old child, was weeping as his rabbi told his class the story. "Why are you crying?" asked the rabbi. "You know that Isaac was not killed." "And I said to him, still weeping," Heschel wrote, "But Rabbi, [what if] the angel had come a second too late?" The rabbi comforted me and calmed me, saying that an angel cannot come late."

A nice moment, but Heschel concluded this story in his autobiography with the realization that: "An angel cannot be late, but man, made of flesh and blood, may be."

As Hillel's statement ends, "If not now, when." This is the time; I promise to continue the conversation with others in the Jewish community, the African American community, and other partners; I am committed to continue to be a part of this conversation moving forward, and I am committed to ensuring that included as part of that conversation are steps to ensure that stereotypes and hateful tropes of any kind are removed from it. And if you

have questions or want to continue the conversation with me, again, I am happy to talk to any of you, any time.

There's a new phrase that has been recently coined - the opposite of cultural arrogance. It's cultural humility. The National Institute of Health defines Cultural Humility as "a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another's culture, but one starts with an examination of her/his own beliefs and cultural identities." May this year be a year in which we see our community and all communities continuing this process. May we reflect, may we critique, and may we find ourselves humbled by the possibility that truth may be found in the nuance, and may our nuanced understanding help us to work with all of our neighbors to do our part, to be God's partners, in building a world of peace.