



Parshat Shelach Lecha
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But What About Black Anti-Semitism?
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Since the murder of George Floyd, I have heard two voices from the members of Temple Emanuel.

By far the more common voice is moral outrage at the structural racial injustice that the murder of George Floyd revealed. *I knew, but I didn't know. I saw, but I didn't focus. I should have done more. I am complicit. But now I am awakened. What books can I read? What films can I see? Where can I get an education around my own implicit bias? What can I do to help?*

That is the first reaction, and the more common. In the last two weeks both Michelle and Aliza have delivered powerful sermons channeling and responding to this voice.

But there is a second voice as well. Less common. Often spoken with a bit of trepidation. Often framed with words like: Of course George Floyd's murder was terrible. Of course racism is a problem. After these preliminary framings, there is always a but. *But Black Lives Matter as a movement is anti-Israel. Many of the activists demanding racial justice are openly anti-Semitic and anti-Israel. Why can't you be honest about black anti-Semitism?* So today I would like to talk about black anti-Semitism.

Yes, this second voice is also correct. The platform of Black Lives Matter contains some extremely anti-Semitic and anti-Israel positions. In 2016 Black Lives Matter issued a statement asserting that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian people; that America's support for Israel makes America complicit in this genocide; and the Black Lives Matter movement commits itself to global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel; and argues that attempts to counter BDS are "a threat to the constitutional right to free speech and protest."

In a similar vein, Michelle Alexander, whose pivotal work on mass incarceration, *The New Jim Crow*, is hugely important, whose op ed piece after George Floyd's murder I read and taught, wrote an op ed piece in the Times in honor of Martin Luther King day in 2019. It was entitled "Time to Break the Silence on Palestine." As wise and revelatory as she is on mass incarceration in America, she is badly off in her discussion of Israelis and Palestinians.

A picture paints a thousand words, and here is one picture that epitomizes how off she is. Her piece accompanies a picture of two young Palestinian boys in Gaza standing amidst rubble. The caption underneath the picture reads: "The Said al-Mis'hal cultural center in Gaza was hit by an Israeli airstrike in August." Which is entirely true. You know what is also true, and what Michelle Alexander did not mention? That Hamas had been launching tens of thousands of missiles on Israeli civilians; raining down death and terror and terrorism on totally innocent civilians, Jewish civilians, Israeli civilians, on homes, on families, on schools, on children. Why did Israel launch the airstrike? It was attacking the places where Hamas launched bombs and missiles against Israeli citizens. Michelle Alexander managed not to mention that in her article. Nor did she mention the time that Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 to give peace a chance and was met with three different wars where Hamas terrorized Israeli citizens. Nor did she mention the many times Israel had tried to make peace and was met with the explosions of buses and cafes and suicide bombers in the first and second intifadas. In her view the Palestinians are the oppressed, and Israel is the oppressor, a conclusion you can reach only if you willfully choose to ignore the more nuanced and complicated story. Such a one-sided and simplistic story is legitimately called both anti-Israel and anti-Semitic. When dead Jews are not seen or reckoned with, when spilled Jewish blood does not even merit a mention, that *is* anti-Semitism. That was Michelle Alexander's Martin Luther King op ed piece.

So here is the question. Michelle Alexander is badly off on Israel. And Michelle Alexander is deeply correct about structural and systemic racial injustice in America. Black Lives Matter is badly off on Israel. And Black Lives Matter is deeply correct about structural and systemic racial injustice in America.

What does that mean for us?

In thinking about this dilemma, I reached out to the wisest and most lovely human being I know, my father in Jerusalem. Two points to frame this.

First, my father is a lifelong progressive. He worked on issues of racial justice in Chicago, in Minneapolis, and in Atlanta, the three cities where he had congregations. When he first got to Atlanta, for his very first speech, Rosh Hashanah, 1981, there were 5,000 people there at the Ahavat Achim synagogue, and he was following a rabbi, Harry Epstein, who had been there for 54 years. For his first speech, he chose to talk about Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. After the service, the president pointedly rebuked him: we do not mention that man in this synagogue.

Second, my father has lived in Israel for 20 years. His wife is buried in Israel. His children and grandchildren and great grandchildren are Israelis.

So I called him up and said Dad: Black Lives Matter is so right about America, so wrong about Israel. What do we do?

David Ben Gurion, he said.

David Ben Gurion, I asked? What does David Ben Gurion have to do with Black Lives Matter?

Everything, he said. He explained that in 1939, the Jews in the Yishuv, pre-state Palestine, had a very complicated relationship with England. On the one hand, England was

fighting Nazi Germany. The enemy of your enemy is your friend. How could Israel not support England in fighting Hitler. On the other hand, England had passed the notorious White Paper which severely limited Jewish immigration to the Yishuv. How could Israel support the country that had authored this infamous policy?

Here is David Ben Gurion's move. In September, 1939, he said: "We must assist the British in the war as if there were no White Paper and we must resist the White Paper as if there were no war." In other words, the war and the White Paper are separate issues. Disentangle them. Deal with each on its own.

Channeling Ben Gurion, we must assist Black Lives Matter in addressing structural racism in America as if there were no anti-Semitism and no anti-Israel animus; and we must address anti-Semitism and anti-Israel animus as if there were no racism. Disentangle them. Deal with each on its own.

What would this Ben Gurion lens mean for us now? To those members of our community who say some Black Lives Matter activists are infected with anti-Semitism and anti-Israel hatred, I say: you are right.

But I also say: we need to walk with Black Lives Matter and work with them to make America more just. I say this for two reasons.

First, it is always good to ask: what is the right thing to do? The right thing to do is to make America more just. The right thing to do is to regard the status quo—Americans of color being constantly fearful of being pulled over, harassed, and killed by white cops—as not acceptable. The right thing to do is to reject racial profiling. The right thing to do is to create a nation where we never, ever hear again the words: I can't breathe.

But it is not only the *right* thing to do. It is also the *wise* thing to do, for Israel, and for the Jewish people. When you walk with somebody, they walk with you. When you are there for them in their moment of need, they are there for you in yours.

Several years ago, the Cambridge city council was on the verge of passing a BDS resolution.

Somebody from JCRC reached out to me and said: do you know anybody in Cambridge who can go to the city council and speak for Israel? I picked up the phone and called Brenda Brown. Brenda is the pastor of the Mass Avenue Baptist Church. We have been partnering with them for over 30 years. In fact, we just went to church, virtually, with them this past Sunday. I called Brenda and said: we need you. BDS is anti-Semitic. It singles out Israel. It is wrong. It is immoral. Can you appear before the city council and lend your name, your stature, and your moral voice against BDS. She said done. Absolutely. She spoke out against BDS, and that proved to be pivotal. The BDS petition was withdrawn.

The world is big. We are small. We need friends and allies. Walking with Black Lives Matter is the right thing, the moral thing, to do; and it creates friends and allies who are and will be there with us.

The noise of this moment drowns out nuance. Let's resist that. Nuance is not only good. Nuance is indispensable for navigating this fraught time.

Ben Gurion's Torah is all about nuance. Assist the British as if there were no White Paper. Resist the White Paper as if there were no war. That's nuanced. That's good. That's what we need to do now.

Make America more just. For the sake of Zion never be silent. Both are true. Both are urgent. Both are our sacred work right now. Shabbat shalom.