

# How to deal with racism.

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I want to look at the current debate about racism from the point of view and the premise that prejudice or discrimination, simply on the basis of skin color goes against every fundamental in Judaism. No significant rabbinic authority has ever suggested otherwise.

Many Jews suffer from having serious chips on their shoulders even if they may not always be conscious of it as a result of hatred, prejudice, and discrimination. So we ought to be hyper-sensitive. As a child, I could not understand why some people so hated Jews that they were eager to murder us all. Neither could I grasp why the rest of the world cared so little that hardly any of them took even the smallest steps to save us or give us refuge. Or why as a six-year-old I was hit in the face by a young thug who told me it was because I had killed Jesus. But I soon understood that there are people in our world who are prejudiced and irrational.

Encouraged by my father, I read books on discrimination against women and racial minorities. I was an admirer of Simone De Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, and the famous American feminists. I devoured James Baldwin and have gone on to read much of the current black literature and polemic. This month I read "White Fragility," recommended to me by a friend. And I have no problem at all accepting its premise that despite whatever progress has been made, the white American population, in general, has little understanding of the social and psychological problems of the black communities.

Attitudes and definitions of racism have changed dramatically over the years. The grand statements of the Declaration of American Independence and the period after the Civil War betrayed the black population disgracefully. And other minorities had to struggle against similar hatreds. Although by now discrimination is legally forbidden, it has taken far too long for too many Americans to comprehend the feelings of alienation of many original, indigenous peoples, descendants of slaves, and other minorities in the USA.

In recent years 'Critical Race Theory' has entered the language of academia. It looked at the poor conditions, material, family, education, housing, and the penal system of many Americans and quite rightly tried to develop tools to help them win a fair hearing in the courtroom and society. Since the USA removed all of its discriminatory laws you might have thought it could no longer be argued that it was a racist society in any legal form. But you

could of course argue that prejudice has continued in many forms, religious, biological, and political. The USA like every society is an unequal society.

But it also argued that because America is a White Society and the levers of power, therefore, are predominantly white, all whites are inevitably racist and therefore oppressors. Racism sustains whites as the most powerful group. According to this new dispensation, race is not bigotry based on racial characteristics but it is an issue of power identities.

"A systemic, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemology embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of black reality." Speech, behavior, and gesture reinforce the power and structure of the dominant white society. So that even unconsciously whites are expressing racism automatically. Talking to someone becomes a way of manifesting power. What counts is not what you mean but how you are heard. And that is true. But it is also true that this happens within white societies too. All manner of speech and accent implies biases and favors one section of society over another or all others. Speech is a game of power and this applies within every group.

In "How To Be An Anti-Racist" Ibram X Kendi has argued that all of white society owes an apology for its past and present oppression. He says that the heartbeat of anti-racism is confession. That all people in a white society need to confess their sins and that reparation should be made for them. Critical Race Theory confidently prescribes what should be done to fight injustice but only in one way. Whites may never be able to absolve themselves of their inherent racism but they can dedicate themselves to ameliorating the condition. We may all need to apologize because we all are prejudiced in our different ways.

Had this remained an academic exercise most thinking humans, I believe, would have agreed. One might have wanted to argue about the best ways to remedy the situation. Do you give people more money? Improve their housing and education? Guarantee free education and health and if so would it be on the basis of color or financial need? One might have been able to discuss affirmative action, more choice in education, changes to how social housing is viewed and planned, and whether compulsion is preferable to persuasion in a civilized and ideally non-partisan way. Whether the issue should be tackled as one of poverty as much as race.

Except that these new ideas about race have been adopted by activists with a wider agenda who are advocating revolution and violence as a tool of change and seek to silence any other viewpoint. This dogmatism used to be confined

to religion. But now it is a typically Marxist argument. Because other attempts to bring about change have not yet succeeded, one can only achieve change by destroying the established order.

A free society allows for choices. And Democracy allows for the acceptance that one can change through the ballot box and not necessarily the sword or the gun. Such change may take time and compromise. But when chaos rules, criminal and purely selfish elements take advantage of discord for their own ends. The violence and looting that have accompanied many of the recent demonstrations, undermines the process of change and this debate in America goes back to the schism between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and indeed all other violent revolutions.

That there is suffering is beyond doubt. It is true that one person cannot fully experience the suffering and pain of another. And that includes anti-Semitism. But we can empathize and try to recognize when we cause pain and do our best to pressurize society for change.

Often those who suffer most from prejudice and hatred are often just as guilty themselves of the very same failures they decry. But the only justification for violence in my book is self-defense, whether personally or nationally. Anything else is a moral crime. The loftiest message can be besmirched by those trying to achieve or impose it. We have to be careful about how we use words. But as the Mishna says, "Words are not the most important thing, actions are."