

Starbucks and Racism: Why Woke is Not

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We now inhabit a new world of identity politics. It is not new, but different. There have always been identities of religion, nationality, and race. Too often they have led to war, genocide, and prejudice. Humanity has been divided between those who struggled to overcome the negative aspects of these differences without sacrificing that which distinguished them and others who made a point of emphasizing these differences not as recognitions of variety, but as bases of hatred, humiliation, coercion, or destruction.

We have gone through a positive period of validating differences of race, gender, and identity. As with every revolution, we are now experiencing a reaction. A pushback either by narrow-minded, selfish fanatics who resist all change or by those who seek to impose only their identity dogmas on others and refuse to listen to another point of view.

The argot Woke, according to Google, means to be aware. It is “a political term of African American origin that refers to a perceived awareness of issues concerning social justice and racial justice. It is derived from the African American Vernacular English expression ‘stay woke.’”

But in fact, it really amounts to being tone deaf and asleep, because in most cases there are different perspectives and narratives. Palestinians will call Israelis aggressive colonialists. Israelis will accuse Palestinians of using violence to deny Jews a right to a homeland. Arabs will accuse Jews of oppression now. Jews will accuse Arabs of oppression in the past. The fact is that few narratives are black or white, and to suggest otherwise is intellectual blindness.

The Starbucks crisis began when two black men were arrested in a Philadelphia Starbucks for making use of the facilities without buying anything. The manager asked them to leave. They refused saying they were waiting for someone. The police were called and arrested the men. No charges were made, and they were released. There was an outcry that this was racially motivated. Starbucks apologized, made generous payments, and declared that they would close all franchises across the USA for an afternoon to educate staff on diversity.

They invited four experts to help lead the effort: Sherrilyn Ifill of the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative, Heather McGhee of the liberal think tank Demos, and Jonathan Greenblatt, the ADL’s CEO.

No sooner had the announcement been made when Tamika Mallory, a leader of the Women’s March, a member of Black Lives Matter, and a vocal supporter of the notorious anti-Semite Louis Farrakhan, objected, saying that the ADL was an organization dedicated to “constantly attacking black and brown people.” For which she could produce no evidence. But of course it delighted her chorus of

biased supporters.

Starbucks capitulated to this overt example of racism and anti-Semitism. The chain announced that while the other three experts will still lead the training, Greenblatt will not, and that the ADL will now be demoted to a secondary role alongside "a diverse array of organizations and civil rights experts" that will provide limited consulting to Starbucks.

Liel Leibovitz commented in Tablet Magazine:

"Anyone following the current state of the Democratic Party shouldn't have too much trouble piecing together the surprising dismissal of one of America's most veteran and venerated civil rights groups. Howard Schultz, Starbucks' executive chairman, is a lifelong Democratic supporter, and donated massively to Barack Obama's campaign. The Democratic Party these days is the sort of place where siding with Farrakhan—a man who calls Jews the chosen of Satan and accuses them of having played an active part in orchestrating the Holocaust—is a badge of radical chic, not a reason for disqualification. Under this new lunatic vision—expressed by Mallory and her fellow Women's March leader Linda Sarsour and increasingly endorsed by the party's mainstream—Jews, long the party's staunch supporters, are rapidly becoming second-class citizens, the sort of folks who can still give money but not expect to have their voices heard. Considering the fact that Jews are, by far, the most prominent targets of hate crimes in America these days, giving in to anti-Semites and removing the ADL from a diversity training initiative of a major American corporation is particularly heinous. Shame on Starbucks for giving in to bigotry."

The excuse that black anti-Semites and Muslim extremists offer is that in the past the ADL has supported measures taken to track Muslim extremists and has criticized black extremists like Farrakhan too. I have no brief for the ADL. But the overwhelming evidence of years of consistently supporting and campaigning for black rights and against any discrimination is ignored. It is possible that previous CEOs of the ADL may have made mistakes. No organization I know of has not. Saint Obama cuddled up to some pretty ghastly black racists like Jeremiah Wright and, indeed, Farrakhan. The present CEO has anyway moved the ADL to the left since he took over and distanced himself from Israeli political leadership. But none of that matters, because the issue is simply that the ADL, being Jewish, must automatically be biased and racist. And regardless of where one stands on the spectrum of Israeli politics, one is automatically unacceptable simply because one is Jewish. If this is not racism and discrimination, I do not know what is.

Similarly, the outcry against Israeli actions in Gaza is another example of pure bias and dishonesty. No one expects the United Nations to be fair or objective. One would no more trust the United Nations than one would a wolf with a pack of sheep. If you need any more evidence, just consider that Syria

now chairs the UN disarmament forum on chemical & nuclear weapons. But the willful pretense that the Gaza protests were nonviolent and peaceful is contradicted by video and text available to anyone who is neither blind nor deaf. It was a blatant cover for a concerted attempt to breach the border, to harm civilians and to use force under the fake claim of an innocent, nonviolent, peaceful demonstration.

All those from Turkey to Syria who condemned Israel have murdered hundreds of thousands more of their own. And many of the European states that condemned Israel—like Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland—have long histories of appeasement and Nazi sympathies.

I have always advocated and supported nonviolent protest. No matter where. But nonviolence means no violence, not disguised violence or partial violence. We know this awful situation in Gaza cannot and will not be solved by violence on any side. In 1967 Israel offered to rebuild the Gaza camps, but the Arab world turned her offer down for fear they would lose the millions in aid poured in by the UN. Israel has withdrawn its forces from Gaza. Gaza is not occupied by Israel. Only by itself. Egypt has a closed border. Why no protests there? The hypocrisy is stunning.

To claim only one side is responsible is the classic anti-Semitic trope that it is all the fault of the Jews. We are the spawn of the devil, and only eradication can free the world of our poison. Thank goodness enough people, companies, and governments can see another side to Israel. I suppose Tamika Mallory, Sarsour, and their friends admire Goebbels, Der Sturmer, and Julius Streicher. Or perhaps they think they were Jewish too. Who would have thought that America would come to this?