

This Is How It Happens: The Choice Between Progressive Zionism and Solidarity

In early December 2016, Jews For Racial & Economic Justice (JFREJ; for the past 26 years, New York City's main progressive Jewish organization) held its annual gala event, the Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer Risktaker Awards. For the occasion, JFREJ rented the Bnei Jeshurun synagogue, which houses the congregation Rabbi Meyer led after his return to the U.S. from Argentina, where he participated in resistance against the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 80s.

When I arrived at Bnei Jeshurun to decorate the space with JFREJ banners - my only role in the awards event since cycling off the organization's Board in 2015 - I found a small swarm of JFREJ members preparing to honor CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, radical attorney and writer Deepa Iyer, and visionary Black Jewish agitator Yavilah McCoy. Together, they made up a fitting slate of honorees for the dawn of the Trump era. Organizers in working-class immigrant communities targeted by anti-Asian racism and by Islamophobia; an activist challenging anti-Muslim policies through the legal system; a voice reminding us all that Black lives must matter in the Jewish world as well as the broader society.

I carried the largest banner in JFREJ's stash up to the front of the sanctuary, and began to unfurl its more than twenty feet of black cloth, painted with rainbow letters spelling out JEWS SUPPORT BLACK LIVES MATTER. Before it was fully spread, a synagogue worker rushed up to me. "The rabbi said that can't be in here," he said, pointing to the half-visible banner, which showed RT BLACK LIVES MA.

I'm going to stop here, before spelling out why that happened at all and what it means for our movements against white supremacy - anti-Black racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, xenophobic targeting of latinxs, and all its other faces - to say that JFREJ members are a subtle and devious people, as well as stiff-necked, and we found a way to have Black Lives Matter visibly present in the sanctuary during the event, despite the stated wishes of Bnei Jeshurun's leadership, both rabbinical and lay.

But why on earth would the leadership of a synagogue that prides itself on its liberalism, a congregation with a Social Action committee that participates in movements for social justice, an institution that names Rabbi Meyer's legacy as one of its touchstones, insist that the message BLACK LIVES MATTER could not be brought into their sanctuary? And not just enforce that exclusion from Bnei Jeshurun's own events, but bar an organization that had paid a substantial amount of money to rent the space from bringing it through their brass-clad doors to the room that holds their torah scrolls. And not even that, but to take the time to prepare the building's workers for the possibility, warning them to

keep an eye out specifically for BLACK LIVES MATTER and intervene if it appeared - leaving parallel messages on other JFREJ banners, like the disability justice movement's "Nothing About Us Without Us", unmolested.

The synagogue leaders were evasive at the time, careful not to make a clear statement of the political positions behind their actions. What was made explicit was that their main concern was that the event could result in photographs showing the words BLACK LIVES MATTER in front of their very distinctive (and beautiful) Moorish-style walls, making it appear through visual implication alone that the congregation might have endorsed the idea.

But everyone knew what was going on - Bnei Jeshurun leaders, JFREJ staff and Board members, rank-and-file JFREJ members, even any congregation members who got wind of the situation. Because it only takes one word to explain it: zionism.

BLACK LIVES MATTER could not enter the sacred space of Bnei Jeshurun - the synagogue could not expose itself to the slightest hint that it might support the vast movement behind that slogan's desperately understated hope for liberation from white supremacy - for a very simple reason. Namely: the rejection, in the Vision for Black Lives platform, of U.S. government funding for the Israeli government's war on Palestinians, pursued through military occupation, discriminatory legislation, and the destruction of homes and farms.

Let's be very specific about what's going on here. The platform is the statement of one organization within a decentralized movement united by a single slogan. It says nothing about the status of the state of Israel. It calls for the U.S. government to end a multi-billion-dollar subsidy to U.S. arms makers, channeled through the Israeli government. It supports non-violent efforts to use a strategy of moral persuasion to change Israeli government policy. And even that mild challenge to the political project of blood-and-faith-defined Jewish control over the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea - to zionism - places the very acknowledgment of black folks' humanity off limits at Bnei Jeshurun.

This is, of course, a recognition of exactly what the Vision for Black Lives platform acknowledges - exactly what young people in Ferguson and Gaza instantly understood as they began trading tips for surviving the tear gas and plastic bullets that greeted their insistence on their own humanity in 2014. A recognition that the denial of Palestinian humanity and the denial of black humanity are one and the same, that there is no way to oppose white supremacy anywhere without rejecting it everywhere.

Zionist organizations and their leadership understand this with impeccable clarity. Even the ones that assert their liberalism with every breath make it clear, as Bnei Jeshurun has, that they know what the choice is, and that they choose Zionism rather than solidarity. They will not allow even the possibility of an appearance of compromise to tarnish their commitment to a blood-faith-and-soil nationalist ideology, even when that means stepping back from the bare minimum assertion of opposition to white supremacy.

The rest of the Jewish world needs to at long last match this clarity. We need to be willing and ready to say that we oppose white supremacy in all its forms, and to name that fact that Zionism not only does not, it cannot. We need to be forthright about the opposition between Zionism and solidarity.

We need to stop allowing our friends, relatives, neighbors to pretend that they can oppose white supremacy in one place and support it in another. We need to help those of them who do wish to be in solidarity with those insisting that Black Lives Matter, with the Standing Rock water protectors, with hijabi women attacked on the subway, with Sikh men accused of 'looking like terrorists', to let go of a word whose core meaning they already reject. We need to welcome them into the movements that can help them find a home not built on the bones of their cousins.

Those of us who have never embraced Zionism as a source of identity, or who have already left it in our pasts, need to say so clearly, and frequently. And we need to explain why. Whether it is because our families never bought in in the first place; because we reject militaristic nationalism; because we reject ideas of ethno-racial superiority; because we embrace the diasporic Jewish cultures that Zionism seeks to supersede and erase; because we are sickened by a century of massacres; or any of the other possible reasons, it will resonate with some of those around us. And as we do this, we must remember that we don't have all the answers. For us, the task is to judge new comrades by their actions, not their command of jargon. To attend to their histories and transformations, and welcome them with day to day practical support, not dismissive rhetoric or condescension.

Those now ready to make the choice for solidarity, and step away from a commitment to a political project that does not reflect their values, have a different set of tasks ahead. They will need to remember that they are putting themselves in a new position in relation to the struggles around them. Their Zionist pasts will make people suspicious - and that suspicion is justified by all the history mentioned above, and more. Their work will be to not deny their pasts, but to outgrow them. To listen and learn; to demonstrate a commitment to justice with actions, not words, with day-to-day practical support, not heroics.

And all of us will need to remember that justice is indivisible. That for some hours on some days, the low bar of "not down with actual klansmen and nazis" is all we need - but that being opposed to white supremacy "except for..." is ultimately no opposition at all. We will need to discover how to work with anyone we can, on some things, but to maintain enough clarity to ensure that we do not mistake momentary alignments for actual solidarity or lasting comradeship. And in Assata Shakur's words, we must love each other and protect each other.