Only White People Can End Racism
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC Canada
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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I am exhausted, worn out, tired, empty, deflated, not yet defeated but it wouldn't take much.

I know I am not alone; you are exhausted too.

They say the problem with Chicken Little was that every day he would yell, "The sky is falling, the sky is falling". He did it so often that people ignored him when it really was. Our experience is just the opposite, every day the sky IS falling, our planet, our lives, civil society, all are in great danger, mortal danger and if we look away for one moment, if we stop trying to hold up the sky, it will all come crashing down. It might crash anyway, but we are trying.

Remember when teens took to the streets of the United States in the March for Our Lives? Gun violence, which has not abated since they demanded action was killing them in their schools and communities. They took up the charge when the grownups of the world failed in their most sacred duty, to keep children safe. The guns are still there, more than even before. I have a t-shirt from one of the rallies; it's in a drawer next to a knitted pink "pussyhat" – a pink touque with cat ears; solidarity for women's rights, in protest against the rhetoric used toward women and minorities from those in power. Not much has changed.

On the dresser that contains the hat sits a picture of a group from our congregation standing with signs and balloons at YVR arrivals as we welcomed the first of nearly a dozen Syrian Refugees who sought safety and shelter in Canada. Months later a hundred of us stood at Jack Poole Plaza demanding that if the US closed its borders to Syrian refugees that Canada let more in.

Next to that picture sits another of Rabbi Brown and I marching over the Cambie street bridge with 100,000 other Vancouverites marching for Climate Justice. Remember when all we were trying to do was save the planet?

Of course, that picture is obscured a little by the home-made mask and bottle of hand sanitizer (also home-made) that sits in a bundle on my dresser. Don't leave home without it used to refer to an American Express Card, now it refers to my own PPE.

But my dresser is messy, we have been home, sheltering in place for more than 3 months. The kids use most of the house for home school and I use the one quiet space to broadcast this service. A white board hangs where we used to have a painting, because we have to keep track

of everyone's zoom calls and screen time and projects. I'm the only one in the house that doesn't need a haircut and we all need a hug.

My siblings are in California. My brother lost his job, my sister teaches her students from home; my nephew left all his stuff in his dorm room because he thought he'd be going back to University after spring break, now he wonders if he'll ever go back.

My parents and in-laws all have medical reasons to stay home and away from anyone who breathes; of course, it took even more energy, and many days of quoting Bonnie Henry to convince them of that simple fact.

But as if the Global Pandemic and economic collapse was not enough to keep us up at night we watched with horror as one police officer's murderous knee crystalized the experience of blacks and people of colour in America. It evoked Canada's own ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples; the anti-Black and anti-Asian violence that is here in Canada too and around the world.

One of my colleagues, Rabbi Jeff Salkin observed that Jews experience the wave of violence against Jews; Pittsburgh, Poway, Jersey City, Monsey as the continuation of the darkest moments of Jewish history.

As one long pogrom.

American blacks experience the wave of violence against them as the continuation of the darkest moments of American history.

As one long lynching.

Antisemitism is the yetzer ha-ra, the evil inclination, of Western civilization.

Racism is the yetzer ha-ra, the evil inclination, of American civilization.

Its horrifying what we are seeing on the news, but blacks in America see and experience it every single day. If you worry that you may be shot by the police or some terrified white person if you go for a jog in a white neighborhood then you have been living social distancing and isolation, your entire life, not just three months of a pandemic.

It's terrifying and I am a privileged middle aged, gainfully employed, well educated, white man living in Canada. The only time I ever fear the police is if I reach for my phone while driving.

Can you imagine being black, out of work, and living in America today?

I can't but I am really trying because if this is hard, that has got to feel hopeless.

Judaism is built upon the great value of holding complexity. It implores us to be conscious of both privilege and suffering, not only mine and that of our people throughout history but of others as well.

Judaism commands us from the very first words of the Torah, when God created human beings in God's own image that ALL lives matter, BUT the lives of those in peril, or jeopardy, under the gaze of persecution, the boot or knee of authoritarianism those lives matter MORE right now and it is my Jewish duty to redeem them.

Too many are imprisoned in our world today, trapped by circumstance, sentenced by intolerance, surrounded by bigotry, tortured by racism. The prison walls are built high by indifference, they are topped by razor sharp tongues that cut like wire and guarded by towers of institutionalized racism that cast long shadows from generation to generation.

In his first major speech as a civil rights leader, addressing the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott, on December 5, 1955, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., powerfully declared:

"There comes a time when people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us so long that we are tired — tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression. …

"We have no alternative but to protest. For many years, we have shown amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved, to be saved from the patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice. …"

The black community was tired in 1955, they are beyond exhausted 64 ½ years ago today; and I hope so are we. But this is no time to rest, this is no time to curl up in a ball, close our eyes, ears and cry, though that's what I want to do for our world so many times a day.

Wake up! Our planet needs us, our democracy needs us, our fellow citizens, especially those that don't look like us need us.

Usually I will admit that in my sermons I am preaching to the choir. Often there is nothing that you can do or are not already doing to avert the societal wrong that I attempt to lift with a prophetic voice of Torah. But that is not the case tonight.

Only white people can end racism.

Not because we are racists, even though I can't see you through this screen, I know you, you are not racists, but not being a racist is no better than not being a Jew Hater.

We must be anti-racists. As Ibram X. Kendi, director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, notes in his book How to Be an Antiracist, "it's not enough to simply be "not racist." "The opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not racist,'" he writes. "It is 'antiracist.'"

As Ellie Wiesel taught us the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

To simply not be a racist is to be indifferent.

Anti-racism is understanding how years of federal, state, and local policies have placed communities of color in the crises they face today and calling those policies out for what they are: racist.

It also requires an understanding of one's own position in a racist society, many say, an acknowledgment that you can't simply opt out of living in white supremacy by saying you're "not a racist" — you have to actively fight against it."

Asked to define anti-racism, writer and middle-school teacher Christina Torres cited Beverly Daniel Tatum's conception of racism as a moving walkway. "We're all on the moving walkway," Torres said. "If you're not racist, you're kind of just standing still on the moving walkway, but you're still complicit in societal racism because you're part of society. The only way to be anti-racist is to walk in the other direction,"

Her observation echoes that of Abraham Joshua Heschel speaking on the same subject fifty years ago, "...morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

So, we are tired, but our people have been tired before, we marched through a desert for 40 years, we longed for our homeland for 2,000 years. We are tired, but we must keep walking, again to quote Heschel, "we must start praying with our feet;" and so we must not only march for justice but leverage every measure of our privilege and resources to end this scourge of institutionalized racism once and for all.

I'm tired, but I am energized.

I'm exhausted but I can't sleep, my conscience will not allow it; and neither can yours.