When Jews Attack Black Lives Matter, It Only Fuels Anti-Semitism
Hen Mazzig, 6/8/2020
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As someone who speaks at synagogues and Jewish institutions around the world, one of the most common questions I hear is: How can Jews reach out to other minority communities? Conference after conference, Jews try to understand how we can build bridges with other minorities, and prevent fringe anti-Israel voices from shattering those relationships. Jews are watching the distance grow between us and racial minorities, particularly regarding Israel, asking what can I do to fix this?

But maybe the answer lies in not only what we should do, but what we should not do.

With protests all over the world expressing the grief and anger many black people feel toward the disproportionate police brutality they face, I decided to publicly support the movement. When I posted Black Lives Matter \(^1\) online, the responses from Jews in America were shocking.

Some started bombarding me with replies that Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an anti-Israel cabal. That they are not protestors but looters and criminals. That Jews should not be supporting, but rather boycotting them. A few people claimed it was all “George Soros’s doing.” \(^2\) I pointed out that anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists like former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke were employing the same rhetoric. One American Jew replied, “Well, he is right about Soros.” I could not believe it.

I am not new to the fight against anti-Semitism and the anti-Israel politicization of progressive causes. I have challenged the Women’s March and LGBTQ groups who were bigoted against the Jewish community and Israel. I think it is terrible that some parts of BLM demonize my home country. \(^3\) However, Jews shunning the cause are not doing anything to help Israel.

The black community in America needs and deserves our voice and support. We must not allow the few activists trying to turn this important cause into an anti-Israel campaign to

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1. Black Lives Matter is arguably the most important civil rights movement in the United States at this time. It calls for justice for Black Americans (and Black people worldwide), and in particular for an end to police brutality and to the policing and incarceration policies that are cornerstones of America’s racist regime. For many people involved with Black Lives Matter, this requires the defunding and/or abolition of the police and prisons.

2. Soros is often a stand-in for the Jews in general in right-wing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. The Republican Party in the United States often peddles those theories. Mazzig points here to a sort of internalized anti-Semitism that characterizes many diaspora Jews.

3. Black Lives Matter is a broad movement comprised of many organizations, people, and ideas. One organization involved in the movement, “Movement for Black Lives,” issued an anti-Zionist platform in 2016. The platform both raised serious concerns among American Jews that Black Lives Matter as a whole would become unwelcome to its many Jewish supporters and served as an excuse for a conservative minority of American Jews to oppose civil rights.
succeed. The way to do this is simple. Our ancestors already did it. When he saw the injustice the black community faced, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr. He put his life on the line for the cause, and in turn, King became an unapologetic advocate against anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. Instead of worrying about minority groups turning against Jews, we should be asking how can we show we haven’t turned our backs on them.

The message black people are getting today from some in the Jewish community is that they think black lives don’t matter. Would you think otherwise if a video emerged of a Jew being choked to death by a cop and non-Jews said they couldn’t support our movement because, say, the Anti-Defamation League said something they don’t like? We would be rightfully furious and see them as insensitive and self-centered.

BLM was not founded on the values of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement. When the official Movement for Black lives platform was written, the work was divided. The section about Israel was written by only three people. One of them was Nadia Ben-Youssef, the American director of Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, who is not black.

Why were these women able to impart their anti-Israel policies on the Black Lives Matter platform? They were deeply committed to the movement. Pro-Israel voices, like the ones in my replies, were not.

Attacking Black Lives Matter only fuels anti-Semitism, making it easier to paint Jews as racists willing to reject the modern civil rights movement just to defend Israel.

Right now, the world is taking stock of who is in and outside the room. Although countless Jews and Zionists support Black Lives Matter — there were even multiple protests in Tel Aviv in solidarity with Black Americans — these voices railing against the movement undo some of that unifying work. Another was Rachel Gilmer of Dream Defenders, a Jewish anti-Zionist.

If you want to change Black Lives Matter Israel agenda, you need to show up for them. Because by showing up for racial justice, we are actually showing up for ourselves.

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4 BDS is the organized movement to boycott Israelis and Israeli products, to urge companies to sever ties with Israel and Israelis, and to pressure foreign governments to place sanctions on Israel. It amounts to a campaign for nationality-based discrimination against Israelis (and, in its more extreme forms, discrimination against “Zionists,” including most American Jews) toward a goal of destroying Israel altogether.