How the Jewish Community Can Be a Better Ally to Black Lives Matter

How can the American Jewish community energetically oppose police brutality and institutionalized racism? It can start by recognizing that Jews of color are an integral part of our community.

Last Wednesday, I awoke to a sadly familiar headline: “Black man shot by police.” Alton Sterling was killed at the hands of the Baton Rouge police in Louisiana. Hours later, Philandro Castile was shot and killed by police in a St. Paul, Minnesota suburb. Both victims were shot several times and both tragedies were filmed.

If a police officer registers a reasonable threat in a confrontation with a citizen, that officer’s actions are considered legally justified to discharge firearms. One shot at point-blank range is likely sufficient to be fatal. Yet, in both instances, and many before them, more bullets were unloaded into the bodies of black men and women by trained police officers than could be possibly justified.
While disproportionate shootings of blacks by police are not new, they are not on the decline. The Washington Post reports that this year alone 509 people have been shot and killed by the police, at least 122 of them black men and 25 black women. It is only July.

In 2000, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the organization where I work, rightfully passed a policy on racial profiling in police departments that “the Jewish community fully understands from its own history the destructiveness of being marked for disparate treatment and hostility.” Indeed, many in the Jewish community have acknowledged for decades this disparate treatment of African Americans. Despite professing to care for the plight of African Americans, however, our community too often fails to take meaningful action.

I can see that the Jewish community is trying to be supportive of a black community experiencing racism and all the pain that comes with it, but the issue seemingly didn’t rise to the level of significance it deserved until five police officers were shot and killed in Dallas. If the Jewish community wants to be a good ally, then we must show up to all the funerals.

And rather than taking action in the here and now, the Jewish community often rests on its historical commitment to civil rights and the sacrifices made in previous generations. As stated by my colleague and ally, Liya Rechtman, “Our obligation in solidarity with the black community was not completed when Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with Martin Luther King Jr. We must continue to advocate on the frontlines of equality and work together (with) communities of color.”

At painful moments like these, I embrace the Jewish tradition of questioning: What will it take for Americans to confront our own biases? And what will it take for the American Jewish community to energetically oppose these inequities?

We as a community can start by looking at our own tradition. In the Torah, Jews are taught to accept others, without prejudice or bias. “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Eternal" (Leviticus 19: 17-18).

Jews can also recognize that Jews of color, long living on the margins, are an integral part of our community, and that this diversity serves as an incredible source of strength. Black Jews can educate the larger community on the black experience and help the community become a more effective ally in this struggle. Jews of color can help the Jewish world live up to its own high ideals, but it first must stop pretending Jews that look like me don’t exist.

I am a Jewish woman of color. Like our president, I come from a biracial family. This complex identity can be a source of pain and frustration. A few months ago at a conference, a colleague from another Jewish organization asked me how my trip was from the West Coast, confusing me with another Jewish woman of color. It was innocent enough, but spoke volumes. That sense of feeling othered is only exacerbated when you are confused with another Jew of color who looks nothing like you.
That's too bad, because Jews of color can help the Jewish community live up to its own aspirations, be a better ally to the African American community and together work towards an America truly safe and equal for all.

My Jewish community needs to acknowledge the alarming injustice in the treatment of brown bodies by those charged with defending us. We can show solidarity by showing up at a protest and prayer vigil. We can encourage local police departments to take implicit bias training and ask our legislators to fund it. We can urge police departments to finally embrace community-policing practices. None of these approaches will end our struggle, but they are a reasonable start in addressing institutionalized racism.

American Jews can play a vital role in changing America for the better. But all change starts from within.

Krissy Roth is a policy associate at the Jewish Council for Public Affairs focusing on domestic issues including civil rights, individual liberties and equal opportunity policy. Preferred gender pronouns: she, her, hers. Carrier of the “woman card.”

Krissy Roth
Haaretz Contributor

read more: http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-1.729921