

WOMEN'S MARCH 2019 RITUAL & DISCUSSION GUIDE

JEWS FOR RACIAL & ECONOMIC JUSTICE (JFREJ)



Last week, a group of Jewish Women of Color — including long-time JFREJ leaders — led by Yavilah McCoy, with decades of demonstrated progressive political leadership and vast experience building multi-racial, multifaith, cross-class coalitions to build power for the people, asked Jewish women to join them at the Women's March this Saturday. JFREJ is heeding their call, as are thousands of other Jewish women and allies. However many Jews, including members of the JFREJ community, remain disappointed, angry, or just confused about the Women's March and are choosing to skip the march, or attend events hosted by groups who are unaffiliated with the official Women's March organization. In addition, some Jews don't attend marches on Shabbat at all, regardless of how they feel about this one, and so may feel excluded from the outset.

For these reasons, members and staff at Jews For Racial & Economic Justice (JFREJ) decided to

SHABBAT

For some Jews, Shabbat/Shabbes is a day of reflection, rest, and reconnection. For others, it is a day of movement and action. For others, it's just another day. Shabbes/Shabbat is one of the deepest, oldest human traditions of exercising radical difference from the dominating, grinding patterns of everyday life; it is a taste of the world to come: the kinder, more connected, more just world we are building towards together. The electric power of being in mass, coordinated action in the streets

compile this ritual and discussion guide as an offering to our community. We do not believe that there is a simple, "right" response when antisemitism shows up in our social justice movements. But we do believe in staying committed to long-term or-

ganizing for racial and economic justice, especially when it gets hard. As we have seen over past months, the choices that we have to make in these situations can be painful, confounding and dispiriting. It is obvious that people of deep wisdom and integrity can come to very different conclusions about what to do.

We hope this guide is a source of reflection, healing and hope for the future we are all seeking, whether we are at home today, or in the streets. Even when we aren't certain of the right answers, we can start by asking the right questions.

can be a taste of that world. The quiet, candlelit song of Friday night blessings with a small group of loved ones can also be a taste of that world. So can a conversation between friends, one that's slower and gentler than the rush of everyday life.

RITUAL MEAL & DISCUSSION: Simply break bread (or gluten-free crackers — you know what your body needs) with friends, family, loved ones, community members. If you like to make a

blessing over the bread, make it. Do you like to declare that the means of bread production should be controlled by the workers who produce it? De-

clare it! Do you! And settle in to discuss the questions below while sharing your meal together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A basic feature of all movements for social justice is that even as they fight against oppression, they are inevitably permeated with oppression. That's because racism, sexism, antisemitism, and other oppressions are too deeply embedded in our lives to vanish from our institutions overnight. The question so many of us have been struggling with is: what should we do when we encounter oppressive forces in our movements? We are deeply moved by the many members of our community who have publicly wrestled with this in recent weeks, regardless of what choices they made in the end. We have witnessed humility, curiosity, integrity and enduring commitment to the dignity of all Jews. In that spirit, here are some questions we invite you to take with you into Shabbat.



QUESTION ONE: Women in the Civil Rights Movement faced pervasive sexism, despite being visionary leaders and strategists, central to every part of that movement. Civil Rights hero Ella Baker described the way she was treated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his male associates during her tenure as Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference:

“[In] other organizations... the executive director was the spokesman. But they couldn't tolerate having an old lady, even a lady, and an old lady at that. It was too much for the masculine and ministerial ego to have permitted that.”

Legendary lawyer Pauli Murray described her

experience as a student and activist at Howard University:

“[sexism] came upon me as a terrible shock...I had never thought of myself in terms of a woman. I had thought of myself in preparing to be a civil rights lawyer for this cause...So, what I'm really saying is that removing the racial factor... immediately the sex factor was isolated and stood there in all of its entirety.”

Activists like Anna Hedgeman and Dr. Dorothy Height called out sexism and fought for gender justice in the Southern Freedom movement. On the eve of the March on Washington, Hedgeman wrote to A. Philip Randolph,

“I have been increasingly perturbed over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing in the crucial grass-roots levels of our struggle and the minor role of leadership they have been assigned in the national policy-making decisions...The time has come to say to you quite candidly, Mr. Randolph, that 'tokenism' is as offensive when applied to women as when applied to Negroes.”

- *What lessons can we learn from these women, who came to various different conclusions and made complex choices as they navigated their commitment to their own dignity and liberation, and the liberation of Black people, in the context of deeply imperfect movements?*

- *What questions would we ask them about the dilemmas they faced, the choices they made and the strategies they chose to fight for women's equality while building a successful movement for racial justice?*
- *What structures are necessary to prevent the rise or fall of our movements on the inevitable harm or mistakes that individuals make? What structures are necessary to hold leaders accountable?*

QUESTION TWO: The Jewish Women of Color's call to action highlights a key issue:

“Jewish Women of Color reject any assertion that there is more anti-Semitism in African-American communities than in others and any belief that African-American leaders, and women specifically, should be singled out for particular attention toward addressing the impacts of the growing presence of anti-Semitism in our world. Of the 1,986 anti-Semitic incidents identified by the Anti-Defamation League in 2017, less than a handful of these incidents were perpetrated by African Americans or other people of color. As White nationalists have historically and presently organized themselves against Jews, we have not experienced communities of color organizing themselves to target our Jewish community.”



And JFREJ's recent statement adds,

“We also view it as imperative to articulate that our social justice movements and leaders, even in their enraging imperfection, are qualitatively different from the right-wing, white Christian nationalist forces who actively seek to do us harm — to kill, incarcerate, deport, disempower, and disenfranchise all of us who will be marching on Saturday. All sides are not equal.”

- *Why do you think there is so much focus on conflict between white Jews and communities of color in recent years, rather than on the centuries of European Christian dominance and the anti-Jewish ideologies and violence that come from it? How should that inform our work for justice today?*
- *When so many people already minimize and misunderstand antisemitism, how should we continue to hold all social justice movements accountable on issues of antisemitism? How might we also maintain clarity that it is right wing white Christians who have been responsible for virtually all of the violence and structural oppression of Jews in the United States?*

QUESTION THREE: The Jewish Women of Color who have called us to action this weekend are explicitly articulating their commitment to standing in solidarity with other women of color — as leaders, not just in their respective communities, but of all of the women who have been inspired by the Women's March and who are standing against the politics and policies of this administration. This is something truly unique that we have not seen before in a national, multiracial, interfaith movement.

- *Regardless of your choices around marching this weekend, what could be new, different, liberatory — even revolutionary — about this extraordinary moment in which Jewish Women of Color are taking center stage as leaders both inside and outside of the Jewish community?*
- *If you are white, and/or a man, how will you support the leadership of women of color within, and outside, the Jewish community? How might that be challenging, and how might it be inspiring?*

For many of us, the struggle to find answers to these questions has been intense and at times painful or even heartbreaking. We want to offer a havdalah ritual as an opportunity to create

an intention for yourself for something you've learned that you want to take with you, and to see if there's anything you want to let go of. Are there any new commitments you want to make?

HAVDALAH

In Hebrew "havdalah" means distinction or differentiation, and refers to the prayers and rituals said to mark the end of Shabbat/Shabbes and the beginning of the week. Shabbat/Shabbes can be an opportunity to experience a different kind of world— one of connection, of breath, of reflection. Yet sure enough, the holy day will have to fade to welcome the rest of the week and the hard work toward liberation.

Still, the distinction between the holy and the everyday is not always clear. Why should we only experience a more just world on Shabbat/Shabbes? What if we do feel the weight of the world on our backs on what many call a day of rest? Havdalah, the in-between space, is a chance to acknowledge that the relationships between holy and profane, between night and day, and between one person and another, are thick, overlapping, and complex. It is a moment of transition between and a blending of the perfect community we might envision on shabbat and the broken, imperfect world outside. It is a most sacred time, an in-between space to stretch as long as we can.

RITUAL: A traditional havdalah service involves blessings over wine, inhaling fragrant spice, lighting a many-wicked candle, and celebrating the

difference between the holy and the everyday. Conducted in the dark by the light of the fire and drenched in song, the result is a thick, sensory experience in community. This can be a beautiful opportunity to hold onto new or old connections with those in your life, the ritual equivalent of the squeeze of a hand before going separate

ways. Regardless of your practice, perhaps imagine havdalah as a different kind of connection from Shabbat, one tinged with the reality that we have differences among each other, that soon we must leave the table, that the holy moment is drifting. The moment isn't any less beautiful because it's complex-- that's exactly what gives it its richness. If you feel moved before leaving wherever you are, make one last connection with

another person, a new conversation, or simply saying goodbye for now.

A traditional havdalah service is conducted in the dark, by the light of a many-wicked candle (a few matches together work just as well). If you have that setup, watch the way the wicks or matches burn as their lights combine into a bigger flame. If you feel moved, think about the difference between watching one wick burn versus six woven together. Hold your hands up towards the fire and watch the way the light hits your



fingernails or the eyes of a person standing near you. Think about how that flame changes with hands and eyes to shine on.

Havdalah is a time for summoning the courage to reenter the messy work of liberation. To close, let's each think about someone who is a hero to us in that work. Maybe it's one of the rabbis or justice leaders who have been doing it under huge pressure from congregations or constituents and have written nuanced, principled responses to the Women's March. Maybe it's a hero from our tradition, or a grandparent, or anyone

who inspires you and gives you courage to do the messy work of liberation for the long haul. Take a moment to think of them. Take a breath. Feel it in your body.

In a circle, say (or sing!) their names out loud. And with their spirit at our backs, let's re-commit to wrestling our way to justice together:

“by showing up, with all of who we are, by committing to staying in the struggle with our heads held high and our minds set on freedom.” — *JFREJ Joins #JWOCmarching*

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FURTHER READING:

[*Jewish Women of Color Women's March Sign On Letter*](#)

[*Women's March 2019: JFREJ Joins #JWOCmarching*](#)

[*Understanding Antisemitism*](#)

[*Moving Traditions Guide*](#)

[*Rabbis Torn About Womens March*](#)

[*Rabbis Letter of Support*](#)

[*Tamika Mallory hurt this Jewish ally ... why she and Women's March are still Mishpachah*](#)

[*Why Jewish Women Should Still Attend the Women's March*](#)

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