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# LIFE OF MEANING

*Embracing Reform Judaism's  
Sacred Path*



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*Edited by*

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*Contents*

<i>Foreword</i>	Rabbi Steven A. Fox	ix
<i>Introduction: Not in the Heavens, Not Beyond the Sea, but Close to Us</i>	Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, PhD	xi
<b>PART ONE • <i>Knowing God</i></b>		<b>1</b>
1. Critical Thoughts on a Reform Jewish Theology	MICHAEL A. MEYER, PHD	7
2. An Experiential Approach to God	RABBI RACHEL TIMONER	13
3. My Fragmented Theology as a Reform Rabbi and Daughter of a Holocaust Survivor	RABBI SUZANNE SINGER	21
4. Where God Meets Gender	RABBI ELYSE GOLDSTEIN	31
5. Speaking Truthfully about God	RABBI MICHAEL MARMUR, PHD	39
6. The Persistence of Life after Life	RABBI PAUL GOLOMB	47

## JEWS AND RACE

RABBI RACHEL S. MIKVA, PHD

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go" [Exodus 5:1-2]. The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed.

—*Abraham Joshua Heschel*

Heschel was speaking at the National Conference on Religion and Race in 1963, in the thick of the struggle for African American civil rights in the United States. Noting that "it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses," he argued that the concept of race is antithetical to religion: "To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart. . . . To act in the spirit of race is to sunder, to slash, to dismember the flesh of living humanity."<sup>1</sup>

Yet the construct of race still confronts us today, because racial justice is not as simple as securing voting rights and access to public facilities for people of all colors. Systemic racism plagues America in criminal justice, local policing, employment discrimination, education,

health care and wealth disparities, daily microaggressions, and a host of other inequities. What does all this have to do with the Jews?

Jews were heavily involved in the fight for integration, voting rights, and an end to Jim Crow. They marched and lobbied and organized. Most people know about Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, two white Jewish boys who were murdered alongside James Cheney in Mississippi 1964 as they tried to register African Americans to vote. Fewer people know about the seventeen white Reform rabbis who were arrested in St. Augustine, Florida, three days earlier, for the crimes of praying and eating with their black brothers and sisters. In jail their first night, they wrote about why they responded to Dr. King's call:

We came because we could not stand silently by our brother's blood. We had done that too many times before. . . . Silence has become the unpardonable sin of our time. . . . We came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly, watching the smoke rise from Hitler's crematoria. We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man's capacity to act.<sup>2</sup>

Jewish philanthropists gave heavily to historically black colleges and helped found or fund some of the pivotal organizations in the fight for racial equality: the NAACP, the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality. Rabbi Robert Marx, a Reform rabbi in Chicago, publicly called out other Jews who acted as slumlords or inner-city merchants who dealt unfairly with communities of color. He went on to found the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, which continues to work in vital partnerships with diverse community organizations seeking social and economic equality.

Ideas about how to be effective activists and allies against systemic racism continue to evolve, and it has become increasingly evident how oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion intersect in the perpetuation of injustice. Aware that historic participation in civil rights efforts is not sufficient, Jewish individuals and organizations remain active in the fight for racial justice in numerous ways and in

disproportionate numbers. We find T'ruah, Bend the Arc, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, HIAS, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and scores of others committed to the Black Lives Matter and Moral Monday movements, to criminal justice and immigration reforms, to living wage and migrant worker rights, to combating police violence and Islamophobia.

It can require navigating complex spaces, especially as politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict intersect with anti-racist efforts. After the Movement for Black Lives issued a platform that included a plank labeling Israel as an apartheid state and claiming that U.S. support made it "complicit in the genocide committed against the Palestinian people," many Jewish anti-racist activists were caught in the middle.<sup>3</sup> Yet Rabbi Susan Talve insists on the transformative possibilities of remaining present to one another (*bineni*), of "listening deeply to each other's truths without becoming defensive. . . . I will keep showing up in uncomfortable and uninviting and messy places." She speaks of using her white privilege to "hold the space for those who are marginalized until their voices are heard and their children are safe in our streets."<sup>4</sup>

We also see Jews still willing to shine a light on bias within our community. In Israel, the Reform Movement has long been a leader in exposing and fighting racial prejudice against Palestinians, foreign workers, and non-Ashkenazi Jews. In the United States, the Jewish Multiracial Network and Be'chol Lashon (the latter organization's name means "in every tongue") confront the tendency to render millions of Jews of color invisible, imagining that they do not exist. Most books present Jewish diversity today by describing distinct religious movements; a few identify differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic praxis. It is not surprising, then, that the majority of American Jews do not know that half of the Jews in Israel are not white, mostly from North Africa and Arabic-speaking countries (known as Mizrahi Jews). They may be vaguely aware of Latinx Jews who live or have roots in Central and South America, and they have heard of the Beta Yisrael from Ethiopia—but probably not the Lemba of southern Africa, the Abayudaya in Uganda, the Ibo in Nigeria, the B'nei Yisrael

from India, or the Kaifeng Jews of China. They may not even know much about Black Hebrew and Israelite communities established in the United States or about the many Jews of color who have been part of majority-white congregations for generations.

Part of this erasure has to do with the unique history of Jews in the United States. Although the first Jews who came to these shores were Sephardic, arriving in the seventeenth century, the massive European immigration between 1880 and 1920 included over two million Ashkenazic Jews, overwhelming the existing communities and changing the racial balance. Like many ethnic (and non-Protestant) immigrant populations, these Jews were not considered white until after World War II, but now a significant majority of Jews in the United States identify as white and it has become the “norm.” As Marla Brettschneider complains, “The very possibility of Black Jews is erased in the U.S. racial creation/coding of Jews and other groups in numerous subtle and insidious ways.” She relates how she searched her university library catalogue for the subject heading “Black Jews.” There was nothing listed, despite the fact that the library carries two books by women who are both black and Jewish, who use the words “black” and “Jewish” in their titles.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly when we talk about black-Jewish relations and the tensions that arose between the communities after the 1970s, there appears to be no room for a person who is both. Julius Lester talks about being sent to cover Louis Farrakhan’s speech at Madison Square Garden in 1985; because Lester is a black man, no one there guessed he was also a Jew. The invisible clash of identities caused him to flee, frightened “like a *shtetl* Jew on Good Friday” by the anti-Semitic rhetoric and the cheers, at the same time that he knew the searing wound of racism’s relentless heat.<sup>6</sup> Complexity of identity for individuals of mixed-race heritage can be even more challenging to navigate, as they sometimes encounter challenges to their authenticity when they try to celebrate their diverse parts.

White normativity prompts repeated marginalization for Jews of color. It can be as simple as walking into a synagogue where people

presume you are not Jewish, or you must have converted, or you are adopted, or (if you are black) you must be from Ethiopia. If you are none of those things, you may become a creature of exotic fascination, which can be just as oppressive. White experience is centered in conversations about Jewish foods, names, hair, humor, neighborhoods, history, and culture. In “African American Jewish Women—Life Beyond the Hyphen,” Yavilah McCoy comments:

I find Grace when I can enjoy being “other” than the normative experience because I am valued as a contribution to the betterment of a whole. Sometimes it’s difficult for me to hit up against cultures in people and organizations that manifest like walls—impermeable walls where difference feels like a reason to stay out and not engage. Grace, for me, comes when I can approach these encounters with compassion and love instead of anger. When I am able to reach deep within me to define myself within and hold on to that, while I share what I know . . . until eventually, what was seen as normative shifts.<sup>7</sup>

Ironically, erasure happens even in the way many white Jewish activists talk about fighting systemic racism, when they speak about how “we” need to reach out to the African American community—forgetting that they are also us. Social media is beginning to make Jewish diversity more visible, and 2016 saw the first national assembly for Jews of color in the United States, but there is a long way to go. Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder researched the growing discourse of white rabbis talking about systemic racism, affirming the acknowledgment of white privilege but also noting the need to complicate race beyond the binary of black and white, to recognize Jews of color, and to “complicate Blackness. . . . In addressing the harm of racism, we need beware of perpetuating the very stereotyping we abhor. White Jewish leaders should be careful not to talk about all Black people as in need of our help or rescue.”<sup>8</sup>

The extensive history of anti-Semitism, and its transformation in the modern period from theological anti-Judaism to racial persecution, makes some white Jews resistant to acknowledging their white

privilege. It can be difficult to recognize how the color of one's skin may bestow "an invisible package of unearned assets."<sup>9</sup> Despite the unparalleled integration of Jews into the fabric of America, many have also known physical and verbal violence, suffered social discrimination or subtle slights, or lost family members in the Shoah. They find anti-Semitic lies and hatred spewed about on the Internet, and they carry fears that any number of events in the world could be "bad for the Jews." It sometimes blinds white Jews to the skin privilege that they also bear.

Yet this history simultaneously helps to catalyze powerful empathy for marginalized individuals and communities. The Shoah illuminated the extent to which people could strip human identity from others, and many Jews feel compelled to resist the demonization or persecution of any group. The immigrant experience shaped American Jewish politics and a culture of concern. Making space for difference is good for the Jews, too.

Underlying these historical and sociological factors, Jews' ongoing commitment to racial justice springs from the religious tradition (even among secular Jews!), which is in turn shaped by texts. "Love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt," it says in Leviticus 19:34—with similar admonitions in thirty-five other places in the Hebrew Bible, one of the most often repeated instructions we have. Empathy is presented as a foundational commandment. The idea of a just God committed to human liberation who will deliver the oppressed from bondage; the teaching that we are to experience Passover each year as if we ourselves were slaves in Egypt, newly redeemed; the command to pursue justice (*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* [Deuteronomy 16:20])—economic justice, social justice, criminal justice, ecological justice, gender justice, racial justice—these flow from the books into which we have inscribed ourselves because they form the sacred story of our identity.

It is worth examining how Torah illuminates the conundrum of race today, even though we recognize that "race" is a modern construct; the idea that skin tone represents substantial social or biological difference

was not present in ancient societies. Nonetheless, the Hebrew Bible has quite a lot to say about the good, the bad, and the ugly of how we form groups, establish boundaries, and evaluate difference. Space is too short for a thorough survey, but a few texts stand out.

In Genesis 1, humanity is created in the image of God—male and female, with no mention of race. We should not underestimate the radical power of this anti-racist teaching. Animals and plants are created according to their kinds, with different species, but there is no different breed of human. We are one species, all endowed with the immutable value inherent in a likeness of the Divine. At the same time, the Rabbis taught, there is absolute uniqueness to every human being. They imagined the remarkable difference between the way a human king mints coins in his likeness, every one the same, versus God's molding of each person a matchless creature, irreplaceable in the unfolding of history (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5).

*Tanach* also grapples with ways that human society fails to honor the divine image in the face of the other. In terse narratives, the text manages to reveal complexities that people often neglect. It teaches, for example, how difference is bound up with power. Just after Torah details the naturally increasing diversity of humanity, proliferating with peoples and languages after the Flood, it tells the story of Babel (Genesis 11). A powerful empire arises that imagines all the world the same; with everyone speaking the same language, nothing is beyond their reach, and they determine to build a tower with its top up in the heavens. We know of structures that might have inspired such a tale, ziggurats of the ancient Sumerian and Babylonian Empires.

Jewish tradition has discerned all kinds of potential problems with this project, such as trying to usurp the throne of God or caring more about the bricks than about the lives of those who fashion them.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, however, the story is a critique of empire, of the notion that we maximize human greatness by privileging one language, one culture, one goal, one truth. Babel illuminates the path of tyranny and the legacy of racism. It is a mirror for Western colonialism and

white privilege, where power has been confused with normativity, and “norm” has been confused with good.

At the end of the Babel story, God reestablishes difference, multiplying the languages and scattering the peoples across the earth. It is not a punishment, but a fulfillment of the divine command after the Flood: “Be fruitful and multiply; populate the earth and increase in it” (Genesis 9:7). Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that Judaism begins with a theology of difference: the radical otherness of God should lead us to respect the radical otherness of diverse languages, nations, cultures, and races. He asserts that Babel is followed by the call to Abraham because God “turns to one people and commands it to be different *in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference.*”<sup>11</sup>

Other passages, however, highlight how easy it is to make difference appear as danger or as evidence of inequality. Pharaoh simply mentions that the Israelites could turn into a fifth column, and all of Egypt is ready to enslave them (Exodus 1:9–11). In the Book of Esther, Haman persuades King Ahasuerus to order the Jews’ annihilation with a bribe and this insidious claim: “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm; their laws are different from those of other people and they do not obey the king’s laws. It is not in the king’s interest to tolerate them” (Esther 3:8).

Sometimes we have to learn over against the text, as it is not innocent of polemic that poisons how we think about difference. In making the case against idolatry, *Tanach* goes beyond arguments that it violates the covenant and is an exercise in futility. It links practitioners to sexual immorality and child sacrifice (e.g., Hosea 4:13–14; Ezekiel 23:39) and sanctions violence against the sacred sites of the Canaanites: “Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred posts, and consign their images to the fire. For you are a people consecrated to the Eternal your God: of all the peoples on earth the Eternal your God chose you to be God’s treasured people” (Deuteronomy 7:5–6). We must recognize our own capacity to demonize difference when it suits our purposes.

Although some critics have identified Jewish chosenness with racism because chosenness is tied to a people rather than a faith, the argument does not fit the vast majority of biblical evidence. Jon Levenson asserts, “One of the hardest points of biblical thought to understand is the concept of peoplehood, which is familial and natural without being racial and biologicistic.”<sup>12</sup> Chosenness is *not* due to any innate superiority, racial or other. The biblical portrait of the people Israel includes not only descendants of Abraham and Sarah, but also a “mixed multitude” that emerges together out of Egypt (Exodus 12:38) and others who became part of the assembly (Deuteronomy 23:8–9). Rabbinic literature imagines that Abraham and Sarah gathered followers from among the surrounding populations at the very beginning (*B’reishit Rabbah* 39:14), and the Sages established a formal path for individuals not born to the community to join it. Over time, it grew even more multiethnic and multinational.

Parts of *Tanach* express concerns about intermarriage and formal treaties with polytheists who would then be in a position to lead the community toward idolatry (Exodus 34:15–16), but a desire to preserve the integrity of one’s culture and praxis is not necessarily malevolent. Unfortunately the language of Ezra, when he rebukes the Jews for intermarrying and mixing “the holy seed” (Ezra 9:1), provides a glancing biblical foundation for those who want to read into chosenness a genetic foundation. While the Book of Ruth provides a compelling counter-voice (presenting the “House of David,” elected by God to rule over Israel, as descended from a Moabite woman), the people of Israel is a “group,” and with every group, from teenage cliques to nation-states, there is a risk of developing exclusivist strains.

Aware of this danger, the prophets teach in numerous ways that election does not provide exclusive title to divine concern. Amos wants the people to understand that God has a relationship with every nation: “‘Children of Israel, are you not just like the Ethiopians to Me?’ declares the Eternal. ‘Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?’” (Amos 9:7). In calling the nation to account for its failures and warning

that the consequences will be dire, he declares that chosenness entails not special privilege, but rather additional liability for falling short of God's call (Amos 3:1–2). The prophet conventionally identified as Third Isaiah is quite clear that foreigners who attach themselves to God and observe the covenant have equal status and equal claim to the spiritual inheritance; he presents the Temple as “a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:3–8). The Book of Jonah portrays a Hebrew prophet being sent to Nineveh, capital of the conquering Assyrian Empire, to save its residents from God's judgment; Jonah struggles with the mission, but God tries to teach him about divine compassion for the whole of creation.

These figures recognize the temptations of complacency, chauvinism, and parochialism that can accompany chosenness—and try to warn the people against them. The nation is reminded time and again that its election entails living in faithfulness with the covenant, including manifest concern for the marginalized within society, the widow, orphan, and stranger. Jeremy Cott calls the theology of the stranger an “anti-election” theology.<sup>13</sup> It might better be construed as the necessary corollary of election, a rule for how to conceive of and engage the “other” to prevent oppression and abuse.

There are a few biblical texts that talk about skin color or ethnicity in ways that get interpreted as race. Numbers 12 portrays Miriam and Aaron complaining about Moses's wife, “He married a Cushite woman!” God comes to the defense and strikes Miriam with snow-white scales on her skin. In fact, the complaint is just as much about Moses claiming a privileged relationship with the Most High even though God has spoken through his siblings as well; the comment about Moses's wife appears as a classic misdirection, one that likely has more to do with tribal identity than race. (Cushite is associated with African, sometimes more specifically translated as “Ethiopian.”) Yet some rabbis read it as a racial reference and, following the ancient *Targum*, which translated the Hebrew word as “beautiful,” asserted that she was in fact more beautiful in appearance and in deeds than all other women.<sup>14</sup> It is also suggested that Miriam is punished measure

for measure, afflicted with skin “too white” for suggesting that Moses's wife has skin that is too dark.

The passage with the most problematic racial history has to do with Noah's son Ham, who “saw his father's nakedness” (Genesis 9:22). As a consequence, Ham's son Canaan is doomed to be the lowest of slaves to his brothers, and since Ham was the purported ancestor of African peoples, this narrative was deployed among the scriptural justifications for American slavery. There has been a great deal of discussion about Jewish attitudes and involvement in the colonial slave trade, much of it polemical, but the simple fact is that the relatively small number of Jews in the Americas tended to resemble their closest neighbors, with slave owners and abolitionists both citing Scripture to defend their point of view.<sup>15</sup>

The multivocality of the tradition traces back to its earliest layers of interpretation. Some Jewish exegesis suggested that Ham was “smitten in his skin.” In the Talmud, it could easily be a reference to a skin disease, but several later interpretations linked it to the color of Ham's skin, commenting on physical traits like thick lips and kinky hair. In the twelfth century, the Spanish-Jewish commentator Abraham ibn Ezra specifically refuted the linkage of race and slavery: people are mistaken if they argue that Cushites are slaves on account of Noah's curse, because the very first king after the Flood was a Cushite (comment on Genesis 9:25). We also find a medieval midrash that identified the descendants of Noah's son Shem (namely Semites, including the Jews) as black and beautiful, with Ham's descendants also described as black—and all the children of Noah are blessed.<sup>16</sup>

The image of the Semites as black and beautiful likely drew on Song of Songs, in which the female protagonist declares, “I am dark and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem—like the tents of Kedar, like the pavilions of Solomon.” She goes on to say, “Do not stare at me because I am swarthy, for the sun has beat down upon me” (Song 1:5–6), suggesting that darker skin within the ethnic group might have to do with working outside and reminding us how race and class are often



linked. Of course the song also reflects the roots of Jewish history in the Levant, where “white” was likely not the default skin color.

While any selection and interpretation of biblical texts can communicate only a limited perspective, there is insight to be gleaned from the ancient words as they challenge us to grow in our capacity to navigate difference. They also reveal why modern issues of race are of intrinsic Jewish concern. Rabbi Ellen Lippmann tells the story of her congregation’s journey, as they discerned a “Torah of Race” in their anti-racism efforts. They formed a task force, engaged in difficult conversations, undertook specialized training, ensured that people of color were hired as teachers and served as members of the board, and so on—all drawing upon the sacred times and sacred texts of Judaism to inform their efforts. “This is what we have learned: Working to undo racism is what we must do as Jews.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1997, newly installed as the senior rabbi of a Reform congregation, I gave a Rosh HaShanah sermon on systemic racism. One furious member sent me a note afterward, demanding that I talk instead about something that “really matters to the Jews.” I cannot think of anything that matters more. Heschel called racism an “eye disease,” one that obviously infects the beholders as well as everyone and everything they see. We are all implicated in the enduring impact that conceptions of race have on our society.

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#### WEBSITES, VIDEOS, AND BLOGS

- Be'chol Lashon, [www.bechollashon.org](http://www.bechollashon.org)
- Jewish Multiracial Network, [www.jewishmultiracialnetwork.org](http://www.jewishmultiracialnetwork.org)
- Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, [www.jfrej.org](http://www.jfrej.org)
- Kulanu, [www.kulanu.org](http://www.kulanu.org)
- MaNishtana, <https://manishtana.net>
- National Seed Project, [nationalseedproject.org/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack](http://nationalseedproject.org/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack) (including notes for facilitators)
- Religious Action Center, [www.rac.org/civil-rights](http://www.rac.org/civil-rights)

## NOTES

1. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Religion and Race" (speech, National Conference on Religion and Race, Chicago, January 14, 1963), <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/heschel-religion-and-race-speech-text/>.
2. "Why We Went: A Joint Letter from the Rabbis Arrested in St. Augustine," June 19, 1964, <http://jwa.org/media/why-we-went-joint-letter-from-rabbis-arrested-in-st-augustine>.
3. See the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center statement critical of the plank while reaffirming its commitment to racial justice: <http://www.rac.org/reform-movement-leaders-reaffirm-commitment-racial-justice-condemn-movement-black-lives-platform>.
4. Susan Talve, "Here I Show Up, Across Political Divisions," *Sh'ma Now*, September 13, 2016, <http://forward.com/shma-now/hineni/348849/here-i-show-up-across-political-divisions>.
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6. Julius Lester, *Lovesong* (New York: Arcade Books, 1988), 235–36.
7. Yavilah McCoy and Miri Hunter Haruach, "African American Jewish Women—Life Beyond the Hyphen," *Bridges* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 183.
8. Abusch-Magder, "When White Rabbis Talk about Race," *My Jewish Learning*, September 21, 2015, <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/rabbis-without-borders/when-white-rabbis-talk-about-race>.
9. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August 1989, 10–12.
10. See, e.g., *M'chilta Mishpatim*; *B'reisbit Rabbab* 38:8; Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 109a; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 24; and the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, etc.
11. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 53. See also the nineteenth-century Torah commentary on Babel by Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin.
12. Jon D. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," in *Ethnicity in the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Boston: Brill, 1996), 160.
13. Jeremy Cott, "The Biblical Problem of Election," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21, no. 2 (1984): 205–7. A portion of the preceding textual discussion is adapted from Rachel S. Mikva, *Dangerous Religious Ideas: A History of Scriptural Exegesis and Its Impact in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (forthcoming); more extensive discussion of the significance of chosenness can be found there.
14. See, e.g., *Sifrei Numbers* 99; Babylonian Talmud, *Mo-eid Katan* 16b; *Midrash Psalms* 7:18.
15. See, for instance, the 1861 argument between Rabbi Dr. M. J. Raphall (<http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html>) and Rabbi David Einhorn (<http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/einhorn.html>).
16. Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 108b; *Tanchuma Noah* 13; *Me'am Lo'ez* (Rabbi Yaakov Culi, nineteenth century); *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 23.
17. Ellen Lippmann, "A Jewish Congregation Tackles Racism" *eJewish Philanthropy*, September 6, 2016, <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/a-jewish-congregation>

-tackles-racism; Lippmann, "Why Must We Work to Undo Racism as Jews?," *Huffington Post*, October 22, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-ellen-lippmann/why-must-we-work-to-undo-racism-as-jews\\_b\\_8353772.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-ellen-lippmann/why-must-we-work-to-undo-racism-as-jews_b_8353772.html).