

THE INTERSECTION OF ANTI-SEMITISM AND RACISM: THE “HOOK”

Ideally, Jews and peoples targeted by racism would be natural allies. There have been many historic moments of cooperation between Jews and different groups targeted by racism, particularly people of African heritage. Over time, Black Gentiles and Jews, particularly in the United States, have come to recognize that they have many experiences of oppression that link their peoples in a common struggle for social justice.

But there have also been too many moments of mistrust and division between Jewish people and Black African-heritage people—on both personal and political levels. One way to look at the difficulties over the years between Black Gentiles and white Ashkenazi Jews is to examine the intersection of anti-Semitism and racism. It can sometimes be talked about as a “hook.”

Jews (white Ashkenazi Jews, in particular) are sometimes scared and panicked as a result of a long history of betrayal and abandonment. This panic has left them, in certain circumstances, wanting to take charge of a situation, exert strong leadership, even urgently interrupt or take over if it looks to them like something could go wrong. These behaviors are a result of the history of anti-Jewish oppression, when things going wrong could mean imminent death. However, when these behaviors are acted out in relationships with Black African-heritage people, it is racism.

And Black people have learned over a long history of oppression that when white people get scared, Black people’s lives can be in danger. In the United States, for example, many states have what are called “stand your ground” laws. Under these laws, if a white person is afraid of a Black person, their fear may be considered a justifiable defense for shooting and killing the Black person. As a result, Black people may understandably want to run far away from any white person who is acting out panic and fear. And yet, running away or abandoning a white Ashkenazi Jewish person because they show their fear is also anti-Semitism.

And that is the “hook”: Jewish panic can lead to acting out racist behavior, and the response to the racist behavior in turn can lead to abandoning a Jew, which is anti-Semitism.

Here are some examples of the “hook,” where people are caught in the interplay of anti-Semitism and racism:

- A Jewish activist and a Vietnamese director of an advocacy organization are working together to improve the lives of domestic workers. The Vietnamese director fails to meet agreed upon deadlines. The Jewish activist panics about the possible impact of the delays and becomes impatient with her colleague, the effect of which is racism. The director testily pushes back at the Jewish activist, blaming her for her panic, the effect of which is anti-Semitism.
- Several Jewish students at a Midwestern University were distraught when they learned that the organizers of a rally in support of Palestinian rights scheduled the event on the Jewish religious holiday of Rosh Hashanah. The Jewish students shared their upset with the rally organizers, but they were oblivious to how their strident, urgent, and demanding tones were experienced as racism by the rally organizers. The organizers pushed back at the Jewish students, saying, “This isn’t about you! Don’t tell us when we can or cannot hold a rally!” This response was unaware anti-Semitism—the organizers failed to recognize the legitimate concerns of the Jewish students. By scheduling the rally on Rosh Hashanah, the organizers were excluding Jewish students who would otherwise want to participate in the event. The Jewish students’ unaware racism elicited the organizers’ unaware anti-Semitism.

- A Jewish leader in a national organization became troubled by her Black colleagues' unaware anti-Semitism during a panel discussion. It took the Jewish leader three months to summon the courage to approach one of her Black colleagues to discuss her concerns. When she did so, her Black colleague became upset with her, saying that by waiting so long to raise these concerns the Jewish leader had left her "high and dry," and that that was racist. The Black colleague's unaware anti-Semitism was "showing." The Black leader had focused solely on condemning her Jewish colleague for waiting so long, without recognizing how scared her Jewish colleague was to even raise the issue of anti-Semitism. Both the anti-Semitism and the racism needed to be acknowledged.

By understanding this intersection of anti-Semitism and racism, white Ashkenazi Jews and people targeted by racism—and people of Black African heritage, in particular—can keep from getting caught in the "hook." With this greater clarity, they can reach for a stronger alliance.