Discord in the Ranks: The Women’s March and the Jewish Question

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The NYU Applied Research Collective for American Jewry convenes scholars and practitioners, in and beyond the Jewish community, to collaboratively develop recommendations in funding and policy for Jewish foundations and organizations.

Recognizing the dramatic societal, economic, and political changes of the 21st century, ARC seeks to generate a responsive body of literature and cohort of thinkers to enhance Jewish communal life for the coming decades.

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INTRODUCTION

I grew up in Reconstructionist Judaism, with a love of Judaism as, in Mordecai Kaplan’s terms, a deep culture and evolving civilization (Kaplan, 1934). I was a child during the years of the Holocaust, and the refugees from Hitler in the New York of my childhood brought home to me in an indelible way the ravages of anti-Semitism. In the 1960s and ’70s I was among the Jewish radical feminists whom Joyce Antler highlighted as “voices from the women’s liberation movement” (2018). In recent years I have been active with Women Wage Peace, currently the largest grassroots peace movement in Israel and involving women across myriad divisions (Israeli/Palestinian, Arab/Jewish, religious/secular, young/old, women from settlements and women from the hip, urban enclaves of Tel Aviv), along with the men who joined them (Kirshbaum, 2017). In the fall of 2017 I was one of four women (the others being a Palestinian peace activist, an Israeli Jewish novelist, and an Israeli Arab educator) invited to speak at the tent in the Judean desert where an estimated 3,000-5,000 Palestinian women and 5,000-8,000 Israeli women came on a “Journey to Reconciliation,” committing themselves to reconcile as the daughters of Sarah and Hagar and work together to end the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (Liebermann, 2017).
I say this by way of explaining how meaningful it was to me personally when Rabbi Sarna invited me to join the Applied Research Collective for American Jewry. I welcomed the opportunity to bring my activism home to the American Jewish community and explore what I find at once troubling and puzzling: why anti-Semitism, why now, and why the spotlight on women? Why is anti-Semitism rising in the US, not only on the right but also on the left (Lipstadt, 2019), and why has the conversation about anti-Semitism on the left focused so insistently on women, and specifically on women of color?

Radical listening—the method of my research—is a way of listening that is radical in two senses of the word: radical meaning going to the root and radical meaning holding a potential for transformation. The method specifies a way of listening that is attentive to voices that speak not only in the center but also on the margins, voices spoken out loud and also those held in silence, or spoken indirectly or only in private. By tuning one’s ear to different voices and to the conversation under the conversation, radical listening can create an opening in the face of what otherwise appears to be an impasse. And finally, radical listening is geared to discovery by directing your attention to what surprises you—a way of listening guided by the instruction: notice what happens when you replace judgment with curiosity (Gilligan, 2015).
The Question

I am not surprised by the rising incidence of anti-Semitism on the right in the US—the swastikas or the slogan “Jews will not replace us.” The deadly Pittsburgh and Poway synagogue shootings were both fueled by white nationalism (Savillo, 2019). My question is about the anti-Semitism on the left, including the confusion of anti-Semitism with legitimate criticism of current Israeli politics. More particularly, I am curious about the involvement of women, notably the leaders of the Women’s March, and the highlighting of women of color, both among the leaders of the march and in the House of Representatives. Tamika Mallory, an African-American organizer of the historic 2017 Women’s March that followed Trump’s inauguration, endorsed Louis Farrakhan, the unabashedly anti-Semitic leader of the Nation of Islam, referring to him on social media as “the G.O.A.T,” meaning “greatest of all time”. Representative Ilhan Omar, one of the unprecedentedly large and diverse group of Democratic women elected to Congress in the 2018 midterm election, repeated screeds about Jews and money and dual loyalty that have long been mainstays of anti-Semitic propaganda. Both women became a focus of national media attention.
I do not think women of color are uniquely responsible for the rise of anti-Semitism on the left or that they are more or less anti-Semitic than others on the left. Rather, what I find especially confusing is when natural allies become antagonistic. The highlighting of women of color as anti-Semitic can, in and of itself, signal an attempt to sow division, silence dissent, and delegitimize criticism of Israel. But how does anti-Semitism become acceptable or excusable to those on the left, given the left’s egalitarian ethos and opposition to racism and discrimination? Rep. Omar apologized for her remarks (Stolberg, 2019) and, not being from a country imbued with the West’s history of anti-Semitism, may well have been unaware of the historical resonances of her comments. More generally, were the comments made by these women of color—trailblazers in the fight against racism—indicative of a broader confusion or over-simplification on the left, whereby a principled, human rights-based opposition to the right-wing politics of the Israeli government and its cruelty toward the Palestinians slides into criticism of Jews? And further, does it do so without making an exception for those Jews, or for that matter those Israelis, who agree with these women of color about the treatment of the Palestinians and who have actively opposed Netanyahu and his even more illiberal coalition partners?

Given that current Israeli politics are as polarized as contemporary American politics, it is just as important to distinguish between opposition to Netanyahu and condemnation of Jews in general as it is to distinguish between opposition to Trump and anti-Americanism. Not everyone on the left confuses opposition to Netanyahu with anti-Semitism, but some do. If, however, we put this confusion between anti-Semitism and legitimate opposition to the policies of the Israeli government to one side for the moment, then we can ask: in the rise of anti-Semitism in America now, are we witnessing the recurrence of one of the oldest and most pernicious forms of racism, as well as a betrayal of the egalitarianism traditionally advocated by those on the left and which is one of the core values of feminism?

But how does anti-Semitism become acceptable or excusable to those on the left, given the left’s egalitarian ethos and opposition to racism and discrimination?
What I know about my question

“[The Jew] has absolutely no relevance in this context as a Jew. His only relevance is that he is white and values his color and uses it.”—James Baldwin, 1967

Writing in *The New York Times* at the height of the civil rights movement, James Baldwin spoke directly to the animosity between Blacks and Jews by stating, in essence, that in contrast to Blacks, what happened to Jews didn’t happen here in America. In stark opposition to the experience of Blacks, for Jews, America has been a land of opportunity. Therefore, when it comes to discussions of race in America, Jews are irrelevant; our only relevance comes from our being white, valuing that and using it. For this, Baldwin doesn’t blame the Jews; his animosity is directed toward Christians.

In *The Price of Whiteness*, his study of Jews, race, and American identity, Eric Goldstein, a professor of history and Jewish studies, underscores that being considered white and thus exempted from American racism has brought many advantages for American Jews (2006).
His point is that Jews have paid a price for becoming white in America. To take on a white American identity, Jews have had to distance themselves from both their Jewish identity and Jewish history—a history that includes not only the Holocaust, but also the pogroms, the ghettos, and in America itself, the quotas and the signs that said whether overtly or by implication: Jews are not welcome. Not in this building, this club, this neighborhood, this university, this organization, this family.

Given the stark color line that bifurcates American society, where one is either black or white, or as the signs on water fountains would say, “white” or “colored,” to be Black or colored means to be oppressed, a member of a racialized minority. To be white, on the other hand, is to be privileged, exempt from racism, a member of the group that benefits from white skin privilege and white supremacy.

Nevertheless it is true that following the genocidal anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, America’s mortal enemy in World War II, anti-Semitism became much less acceptable in the US. To many Americans, Jewish identity became simply a variety of white identity, an alternative to Protestant or Catholic, a matter of going to synagogue or temple rather than to church. Furthermore, Jews’ own antipathy to racism, reinforced as it was by the recent history of the Holocaust, led many Jews not only to empathize with the plight of Blacks in America but also to become major participants and even leaders in the civil rights movement, risking their lives for the cause of Black people’s rights and freedom. Rabbis marched hand in hand with Dr. King on many occasions, and in Freedom Summer, 1964, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, two Jewish civil rights activists, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were murdered alongside the Black activist James Chaney for trying to register Black voters. Put simply, for Jews to benefit from racism ran counter not only to Jewish history, but also to core Jewish values.

Still, while Jewish commitment to the civil rights movement looms large in American Jewish discourse and communal memory, the history of Black-Jewish relations from the 1960s until the present has been far more fraught and complicated than the picture of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel walking arm in arm with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. might imply. These tensions surfaced in what became the historic Women’s March, organized to demonstrate women’s resistance to Donald J. Trump’s inauguration as president.
The Women’s March

It was in the service of Jewish values, notably a desire to help with *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, that in the days immediately following Trump’s election, Vanessa Wruble, a white Jewish woman, along with a small and hastily assembled group of other women, moved to organize a march to take place in January 2017, immediately following Trump’s inauguration. Diversity was a concern right from the beginning, and a special effort was made by the organizers to ensure that women of color would not only participate in the march but would be in leadership positions.

Letty Pogrebin points out that the tensions that erupted between women of color and white Jewish women have a history, reflecting the confluence of but also the conflict and competition among three intersecting strands of identity: women, Jews, and African-Americans (2019). For example, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was seen by some Jews as a quota, whereas to Blacks it was a long-overdue rectification of injustice and thwarted aspiration. Feminism, which was understood to be white and Jewish, was seen as benefiting some women, while leaving African American women in the shadows. The 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville teacher strike was viewed as a competition between white, female, Jewish teachers and African-American community organizers, mostly women. And the 1975 International Women’s Conference in Mexico City was the first UN-sponsored forum to pass a Zionism is racism resolution.

According to an article published in December 2018 in the online Jewish magazine *Tablet*, when it came to the Women’s March, there was a Jewish problem right from the start. Two women of color who had been recruited to be among the leaders of the march—Tamika Mallory, a Black gun-control activist, and Carmen Perez, a Latina woman working on criminal justice reform—were uneasy about Vanessa Wruble’s participation. *Tablet* reported that in the first hours of the first meeting when the women were opening up about their backgrounds and personal investments in a resistance movement to Trump, Perez and Mallory allegedly said that in their eyes, “Jewish people bore a special collective responsibility as exploiters of black and brown people,”—an allegation Mallory and others deny (McSweeney and Siegel, 2018). According to Wruble, when she told the group that her Jewish heritage inspired her to try to help repair the world, Mallory and Perez replied that before Jews could be welcomed, they needed to “confront their own role in racism” (Stockman, 2018).

Wruble was troubled by this singling out of Jewish women as racists and also by discovering via Google that the source of the accusation was *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*. Published in 1991 by Louis Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam, the book had been condemned by Henry Louis Gates Jr., University Professor and Director of the Center for African and African American Research at Harvard, as “the bible of the new anti-Semitism.” Gates noted in 1992 that, “Among
significant sectors of the black community, this brief has become a credo of a new philosophy of black self-affirmation” (McSweeney and Siegel, 2018).

Despite her misgivings, Wruble continued to work with the group until shortly after the march when Mallory, Perez, and Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian American activist, forced her off the steering committee. The reasons are still in dispute, but according to Wruble and someone who witnessed this rupture, Jews were considered inherently racist and deemed untrustworthy.

In late December of 2018, The New York Times, picking up on the Tablet piece, ran a front-page story under the headline: “Women’s March Roiled by Accusations of Anti-Semitism” (Stockman, 2018). As it turned out, the march itself had splintered over the issue of anti-Semitism; in many cities, two separate marches would be held in January 2019. One march was sponsored by the Women’s March, with its self-appointed steering committee composed of three women of color (Mallory, Perez, and the Palestinian-American Linda Sarsour) and one white woman who was not Jewish (the fashion designer and entrepreneur Mari Lynn Foulger, who adopted the nom de guerre Bob Bland). Another march was sponsored by March On, a new organization created by Wruble and others to support women’s activism, denouncing anti-Semitism along with other forms of racism.

Stung by the accusation of anti-Semitism, the four women leaders of the Women’s March moved to remedy the situation. Expanding their steering committee to 20, they quickly added three Jewish women, but notably, one was Black, one bi-racial, and one transgender. Thus none could be considered privileged. The intention from the beginning had been that the march be led by women from groups that are among the most marginalized and most vulnerable to oppression. On the newly enlarged steering committee, most of the women were either of color or trans and, with the exception of the trans woman, no Jewish woman was white.

Citing Baldwin, Goldstein fills in the history:

Many Americans today, focused as they are on the basic division between whites and “peoples of color,” would undoubtedly accept the judgment of the eminent African-American writer James Baldwin, who claimed in 1967 that Jews’ history of difference and exclusion meant little in the United States (2006, p. 1).
The Wellfleet Incident

Baldwin’s comment shone a very bright light on an experience I had in the early 1990s when, in conjunction with my then-graduate student Judith Dorney (Dorney, 2018) and the feminist Episcopal priest Dr. Katie Cannon, I organized retreats on women and race as part of the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development. At the behest of The Boston Foundation, my research team, composed of the largely white Harvard graduate students in psychology and education, had been invited to bring our Women Teaching Girls/ Girls Teaching Women retreats into the Boston Public School system, where we would be working with a more racially diverse group of middle school principals and teachers. In preparation for this move, I asked Katie Cannon if she would join me in leading a series of retreats for the research group. The women who assembled in the fall of 1990 were equally balanced between Black and white, with one Hispanic woman, an Argentinian psychoanalyst known for her work on helping women deal with their conflicts over the expression of anger. All of the women were actively committed to strengthening women’s voices and promoting girls’ education, and aside from the graduate students, all held leadership positions in education, philanthropy, social policy, health, or the arts.

**Two questions guided the retreats:**
Where am I as a Black, white, or Latina woman in relation to Black, white, and Latina girls? And given the racial tensions among women, is there a way for us not to carry these tensions forward into our work with girls, the next generation of women?

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Where am I as a Black, white, or Latina woman in relation to Black, white, and Latina girls?
During the second of the retreats in January 1991, Katie Cannon raised what was to be a persistent hope: “Is there something about the way we, as black, white, Hispanic women, relate in these retreats that can be transferred to girls? Can there be a generation of girls who are not racist? Can there be a generation of girls of color who will not internalize racism?”

As a group meeting in the hope of addressing and seeking to heal racial tensions among women in American society, we had one advantage: we were starting with girls’ voices. Not the voices women remembered, but the actual voices of girls. Our focus was on the future, on the next generation of women. We would begin each retreat by listening to girls—to excerpts from interviews with girls that had been conducted by members of the Harvard Project, or to something a girl had written, such as the book, “Making Friends,” by an eight-year-old Afghan girl in one of the schools where the research was being conducted, or to the voices of girls in novels and poems written by women.

Time and again we were struck by the honest voices of girls, their shrewdness and perceptiveness in the years leading up to adolescence, and then by the turning point in girls’ lives that the research had brought into clear focus, when girls’ experience of themselves and the world suddenly becomes, in the words of the Jamaican American poet Michelle Cliff, an “obsolete geography” (1980). It was stunning to witness. Coming of age and entering secondary education, girls are enjoined in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways to align their perceptions and their voices with ways of seeing and speaking about themselves and the world that require them to distance themselves from or belie their experience. As Annie John puts it at the end of Jamaica Kincaid’s coming-of-age novel when, at the age of twelve she rewrites her own history, “So now I, too, have hypocrisy, and breasts (small ones), and hair growing in the appropriate places, and sharp eyes, and I have made a vow never to be fooled again” (1983).

The rewriting of history consists of large and small erasures and insets, of moments when a person or a community is required to distance themselves from their own experience. I found myself wondering: What in Jewish history has become an obsolete geography? Why has there been a need following Baldwin to deem irrelevant the Jewish encounter with a murderous racism or to dismiss its relevance in the American context? A major effort in delineating Black identity has been to take Blacks further back and locate their beginnings not in the American South but in Africa, their identity as persons validated...
by not having started out as slaves on American plantations. But neither does Jewish history begin in post-Holocaust America, where Jewishness can become a mere fillip or grace note on whiteness—in fact, it has to become not much more than that in order for Jews to be seen as white.

Among the organizers of the Women’s March, or so the reasoning goes, Jews, being white, have no claim to oppression. In effect, the assumption is that Jews, granted white privilege, benefit from structural racism or white supremacy and therefore do not belong among the leaders of a movement designed to free the most marginalized and vulnerable among women, the women most at risk from the injustices of white racist patriarchy.

Still, on the face of it, it’s hard for me to see what the ostracism of non-trans white Jewish women from the steering committee of the Women’s March was designed to achieve. How does this rejection of those who might otherwise seem natural allies, such as Vanessa Wrubble, advance the liberation of women? And perhaps more to the point, how does the exclusion of cis-gender white Jewish women serve the interests of Black women or women of color in particular, or Black people and people of color in general? Whether intentionally or unintentionally, women were not excluded from positions of leadership for being white (the white Bob Bland remained on the steering committee throughout) or for being Jewish (three Jews, one Black, one bi-racial, and one trans Jewish woman were chosen to be on the committee) but for being, so to speak, purely white and Jewish. It seems that there was something about being white and Jewish that, in the absence of some obvious cultural vulnerability or marginality such as being transgender, was getting under the skin of the women on the original steering committee.

The more closely I listened, the more curious I became. The front-page Times article on anti-Semitism in the Women’s March, the continuing criticism of Ilhan Omar, even following her apology, and the attacks on “the Squad” (the four strong and outspoken women of color elected in 2018 to the House of Representatives who were reviled by President Trump, accused by him of being both anti-Semitic and anti-American), had brought many simmering conflicts out into the open.

I found my thoughts returning to what had been the unexpectedly abrupt and painfully unresolved ending of the women and race retreats.

It seems that there was something about being white and Jewish that, in the absence of some obvious cultural vulnerability or marginality such as being transgender, was getting under the skin of the women on the original steering committee.
It was at the third of the Women and Race Retreats, held in April of 1992, that a rift broke out among the women that proved to be irreparable. For the first time, the issue of Jewishness came up, and as the only Jewish woman in the group, I was the one who introduced it. I had not thought about my Jewish history or my Jewish identity in the context of these retreats or seen either as particularly relevant until, listening to Katie Cannon speaking of women of color versus white women, I suddenly heard a resonance that surprised me; the distinction Katie was making echoed the distinction that had permeated my childhood, except that in my childhood the world was divided not into women of color and women who are non-colored (i.e., white women) but into Jews and non-Jews. Again the issue implicit was oppression—who were the victims of oppression versus who were not, but being both white and Jewish, I had been on both sides of this equation.

Upon reflection, to be white and Jewish is to occupy a space that belies a rhetoric resting on stark divisions between victims and perpetrators, and privileging the former while vilifying and excluding the latter. The very fact that I occupy both sides of this equation pushes for a more complex understanding of the boundaries between victimhood and oppression (and more troubling, of how the former can shift into the latter) than some branches of left-wing discourse on anti-racism allow. What would it mean for these movements to recognize that the identification of victim and oppressor can be in part a matter of perspective, location, and historical context? It seems to me that white Jewish women, by occupying this dual position, embody a reality that cannot be known, spoken, or acknowledged. Moreover, it is only by ignoring Jewish victimhood that one can so easily ignore the parallels between Zionism and other claims for self-determination of oppressed people, including the Palestinians, and the danger that all movements for liberation, when fueled by a distrust of a bad other, can give way to the very modes of oppression they were initially protesting against.

I was also primed to hear the stark opposition between women of color and white women as problematic because, although in the terms of American racism, I am indisputably white, in my mother’s blond and blue-eyed family—where several of her relatives passed for non-Jews—
I, being neither light skinned nor blue-eyed, was the one who could potentially out the family as Jewish. Are you Italian, I would sometimes be asked; are you Greek? Are you from New York? someone asked me one day in King’s College, Cambridge, and there it was clear that what I was really being asked was: Are you Jewish? Growing up, I did not think of myself as white, and even now, looking at my arms or at my face in the mirror, I wouldn’t describe my olive skin as white, even though I know full well that in American society I am perceived as a white woman; on a daily basis, in ways both visible and invisible to me, I benefit from white skin privilege. In the lingo of American racial politics, in the terms of the distinction Katie Cannon was making, I am a non-colored, meaning a white, woman, or as I have come to think of it: a woman of no color.

Still, I might not have said anything in the context of Katie’s remarks except for the stunned silence that followed what can only be described as an explosion of outrage on the part of Teresa Bernardez, the Argentinian psychoanalyst. Being Hispanic and thereby at least in the eyes of some, a woman of color, she may have felt free to respond to Katie’s division of women into racists and those oppressed by racism in a way that the indisputably white women in the group felt they could not. Or perhaps it was being Argentinian and from a privileged background, or maybe it was the silence of the white students that provoked her to speak, but whatever the reason, she held out both arms in Katie’s direction and with palms facing forward to signal stop, said: “What the fuck! Don’t give me this shit!” The clear implication being that there was something objectionable in what had become the terms of the conversation. Leaning her head back and breaking eye contact, Katie withdrew from the group.

“You know,” I said after some time, speaking into the stunned silence, “I am reminded of something from my childhood.” I spoke of having grown up in a world bifurcated into Jews and non-Jews; I said that, like the division of women into colored and not colored, the division of people into Jews and non-Jews is not trivial. At various times and places, being of color or being Jewish has been grounds for being murdered. As it was and continues to be for Blacks in America; as it was for Jews in Europe during my childhood and is now here in America, as evidenced in the recent synagogue shootings. And as a result, for many Blacks and Jews, the distinctions between colored and white, Jew and non-Jew have become so ingrained that they no longer register as ways of speaking or seeing, but simply as how things are, a shortcut when it comes to sizing up strangers. “What’s his name?” my mother would ask, meaning: is he Jewish? It was always the first question, so in this sense I understood where Katie was coming from.
And maybe it was this that led me to speak to her so directly. I can’t remember, was Katie looking at me? Only that I was sitting across from her in the small living room of the cottage in Wellfleet that belonged to somebody’s friend. As I recall now, what went through my mind was the hope that my experience as a Jewish woman might sharpen the focus on what I perceived to be a conversational dead end: an impasse where it becomes difficult to listen because the very terms of the conversation have been set in a way that makes it impossible for some to speak of their experience. The impasse, that is, that arises when some people are told by others that, in effect, they have no voice, or their voices don’t count; when rather than being asked, people are told who they are and what they feel and how they should think and speak, including about themselves.

In this spirit, I said that it had taken me a surprisingly long time to realize that non-Jews do not think of themselves as non-Jews. And then looking at Katie (I still can’t remember, did she turned to look at me then?), I said: “So to you I am a woman of no color and to me you are a non-Jew. Where do we go from here?”

In retrospect, I suspect that what prompted me to speak was the sinking feeling of watching hope drain from a group that had been so filled with hope. Katie herself had described our group as making palpable the vision of women coming together, crossing racial alignments on behalf of girls, aligning instead with one another as women in an effort to spare the next generation from the scourges of racism; a vision of committing ourselves, as women, to repair the world by acting in concert as a force for transformation.

But as I recall now, Katie would have none of it, and, in fact, no one said anything. Baldwin was right. Even some 20 years later and still today it remains true: when it comes to discussions of race in America, the experience of Jews is irrelevant; all that counts is that Jews are white.
Women and the Jewish question

But was it true? I ask myself now, many years later. As the only Jewish woman present, was I the only one who could have challenged this splitting of women into women of color and white women? To be a white woman was to be seen as without color, non-colored, and thus, by definition, among the racists. Like Jews assuming all non-Jews are anti-Semites.

The issue was never resolved by the retreat group. In fact, the group broke up shortly thereafter and the “Wellfleet incident” was never discussed, except in groups of twos or threes and always in a hushed manner. As if some taboo had been broken. At several points in later years, someone would suggest that we reconvene at least once to talk about what had happened, and both Katie Cannon and I had separately said that would be a good idea. But the meeting never took place.
“Where were you, white woman, when they came for me in the middle of the night?”

What strikes me now upon reflection is that trust was on the line—long a bone of contention among women living in patriarchal cultures. And in fact, the matter of trust was raised directly in one of the early retreats by a woman of color, who, speaking to the white women in the group, posed the rhetorical question: “Where were you, white woman, when they came for me in the middle of the night?” A question equally alive for Jews: “Where were you, non-Jew, when they came for me in the middle of the night?”

In response to Katie’s labeling me as a white woman—and thus presumably someone whom she could not trust to be there for her and certainly not in the extreme—I was, as far as I could see, the only one present who could say in return: you know, to you I am a woman who is not colored and therefore who cannot be trusted not to align with racism, but to me you are a non-Jew and therefore how can I count on you to be there for me when they come for me in the middle of the night? How can either of us trust one another? If one paints with a broad enough brush, history backs both of us up.

And maybe it’s that: in addition to the myriad differences that separate women of color from white Jewish women, including everything that follows from the legacy of slavery and white supremacy and from the comparative success of Jews in America, we also have too much in common—Jewish women and women of color—even when the categories of oppression don’t overlap and the white women are, so to speak, pure white. Because we both have a sharp eye for hypocrisy and betrayal, and we both have been activists and initiators of movements for social justice and peace (Black Lives Matter, #Me Too, Women Wage peace, to name the most recent). Yet this commonality between women of color and Jewish women becomes undiscussable if discussions of race are to continue along what has become their well-trodden course. In the current racial discourse, there is no space for
acknowledging our shared planes of experience—
as women, and also as peoples of color and Jews.
Something is missing here, what is it really that
keeps us apart? Why is the divide between white
Jewish women and women of color in particular?

With the 2020 elections on the horizon, divisions
among women on the left are in danger of
splintering not only a march but also a potentially
decisive political majority. Thinking of women as
a group rather than a group of factions, it is hard
to resist the stubborn fact that, as one member
of the retreat group observed, girls are half the
population in every generation. Once suffrage has
been won, women are a voting majority, which may
be a clue to the investment of some in fomenting
dissent among women, especially now when
the gender gap in voting is increasing and
women’s votes may be critical to electoral success.

Three of the four original leaders
of the Women’s March—Tamika
Mallory, Linda Sarsour, and Bob
Bland—resigned in the summer
of 2019, in part to remove the stain
of anti-Semitism from the march
in anticipation of the upcoming
2020 elections.

According to the *Times*’ report that came out
in September when the announcement of the
resignations was made public, “17 new board
members had been appointed following a national
search” (Stockman, 2019).

Yet, in the almost tragi-comic manner that has
come to characterize these groupings and re-
groupings, one of the women on the new executive
board, chosen to form the new leadership of
the Women’s March, was an individual, Zahra
Billoo, who, as the ADL noted, turned out to
be a person “who has a long history of deeply
offensive and anti-Semitic statements.” In addition
to condemning Zionism as racism and calling
for a Palestine “from the river to the sea,” Billoo
had expressed the sentiment that there was “no
need for a holocaust museum, seeing as Israel
has taken it upon itself to recreate it. #Israel #
Nazis” (ADL, 2019). To the resigning leaders of the
march—despite having characterized their decision
to appoint new leadership as a move to unite
“diverse women around a set of principles that
are intersectional, visionary, and bold” (Stockman
2019)—Billoo’s membership on the board of
directors presumably had not been perceived as a
problem until the ADL identified her anti-Semitic
statements and sentiments, at which point she was
called upon by the board to resign.
What I don’t know and want to know

If we listen closely enough, we might ask: What is the conversation under this conversation?

How, at this particular moment, did the Women’s March turn into a dire referendum on Jewish racism and “the crime of Zionism”? How has the decades-old journey of women from exclusion to inclusion become diverted?

And what happened to the idea of the Women’s March as potentially transformative?

Is it too early for a united feminist political front—or, more disconcertingly, too late?
Policy Recommendations

1. Jewish women may have a critical role to play in countering the current rise in anti-Semitism on the left. Invest in women’s leadership and amplify the importance of Jewish women being at the table, even when it’s hard, and to stand against anti-Semitism along with other forms of racism.

2. Radical listening offers a way of moving through impasse. Invest in masterclasses and workshops on radical listening.

3. Jewish institutions should support the development of courses on radical listening to be taught within the University as a way of educating students to engage with the differences and the diverse viewpoints in their midst.

4. Sponsor Women Teaching Girls/Girls Teaching Women retreats both within the Jewish community and with other communities to encourage women’s honest voices and provide a framework of hope for cross-generational dialogue among women.
Endnotes


4. See also Sales, B. (2019, 24 October). Most US media coverage of anti-Semitism focuses on the left, study finds. *The Times of Israel.*

5. In her statement of apology, “Listening and learning, but standing strong,” Omar said, “Anti-Semitism is real and I am grateful for Jewish allies and colleagues who are educating me on the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes. My intention is never to offend my constituents or Jewish Americans as a whole. We have to always be willing to step back and think through criticism, just as I expect people to hear me when others attack me for my identity. I unequivocally apologize.”

6. See also Kendi, I.X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist.* New York: One World, p. 131, “Going after White people instead of racist power prolongs the policies harming Black life. In the end, anti-White racist ideas, in taking some or all of the focus off racist power, become anti-Black. In the end, hating White people becomes hating Black people.”


Carol Gilligan is an American feminist, ethicist, and psychologist best known for her work on ethical community and ethical relationships, and certain subject-object problems in ethics. She is a professor at New York University and a visiting professor at the University of Cambridge. She is best known for her 1982 work, *In a Different Voice*. Her work has been credited with inspiring the passage of the 1994 Gender Equity in Education Act. In 1996, Time magazine listed her among America’s 25 most influential people. She is the founder of ethics of care. Gilligan has recently moved from Harvard to New York University, where she is now able to expand the range of her work. She continues to be highly prolific, publishing on a wide variety of topics relating to female development, manhood and masculinity, qualitative methods, and politics.