

Racial Justice Task Force Fall 2021 Update

This past fall, Beth El announced a yearlong study and reflection on racial justice. Since then, the Racial Justice Task Force shared 18 readings and podcasts for learning and reflection, and distributed a survey to gauge individual congregations' thoughts on racial justice equity and the role of Beth El in learning about and responding to racial issues in our community and country.

More than 80% of Beth El members who took the survey said they are concerned about racism in the United States. Nearly 70% of respondents said the best way Beth El could respond to racial challenges is by educating members on our nation's history of racism and injustice.

Other survey findings:

- 80% of respondents think Beth El should continue becoming a congregation that works toward racial justice (fewer than 5% disagreed).
- Only 25% of respondents said they had attended an introductory training on race although lots of people had read books/articles, listened to podcasts, and watched documentaries.

In addition to education on our nation's history of racism and injustice, the majority of respondents identified the following steps they would like to see Beth El take:

- Reach out to people of color in our Beth El congregation to find out what actions they wish our congregation would take to better meet the needs of their families.
- Reach out to people of color in our local community to find out what actions they wish Beth El would take as partners in creating racial justice.
- Infuse racial equity into our youth educational and social programming.
- Infuse racial equity into Beth El's lifelong learning and adult social programming.
- Get involved in advocacy to address structural racism.

The Racial Justice Task Force will work with Beth El's committees and staff to follow through on these congregational recommendations.

In late September, the RJTF held its first community wide program, "How to Have Difficult Conversations" with Billy Planer from Etgar 36. Billy's presentation focused on a particular pathway towards engagement in racial issues, that of direct personal outreach and connection.

Our second event, a level-setting educational program, on December 12th, focused on looking at racism as a systemic issue requiring system-wide solutions. Nearly 50 Beth El members (and a handful from Judea Reform) participated in a three-hour online seminar on racial inequality in the United States. The seminar, facilitated by Greensboro's Racial Equity Institute, provided participants with evidence-based studies showing that Black Americans receive unequal treatment across every social system, including healthcare, education, law enforcement, child welfare, banking and lending. Presenters also showed through multiple academic studies that racial disparities persist even when socio-economic differences are taken into account. These realities point to what is often called "structural racism," the idea that systems treat races differently regardless of individual behavior, or cultural tradition. Dismantling these inequities will require collaborative solutions across various systems. Ninety percent of participants who

provided feedback said they learned something new from the presentation. Many expressed appreciation for the well organized, clearly presented, carefully researched, well explained data with opportunities for audience participation in the chat. As one participant said, “it put a whole set of researched, vetted data in my hands” so a person can “better talk about the disparities.” On Dec. 16, Beth El members who participated in the seminar met on Zoom for a follow-up discussion and reflection on the presentation. This smaller group processed takeaways and potential next steps for Beth El. Participants said they wanted more opportunities for discussion, and opportunities to hear from panels of black and biracial Jewish families.

Beyond programming, the RJTF has focused on infusing the theme throughout the congregation by engaging committees to align at least 25% of their programming, communications, and operations using a racial justice lens. We hope that where possible, groups will exceed this bar by using a racial justice lens even when the topic isn’t racial justice. Programming could include movies, discussion groups, book groups, study sessions, social action events, d’var torahs, or talks with visiting scholars. Operational decisions could include choices of vendors or investment strategies. Talmud Torah and youth programming is also participating and has formed its own racial justice sub-committee.

The RJTF is here to serve as a guide and resource for programming across the congregation so all Beth El members can participate in learning and discussion through their already established connections within the congregation-

This year is an opportunity for the congregation to focus learning and attention on the issue, and for the congregation to then learn and reflect together on next steps. These are complex conversations that we must approach with humility and grace. And, yet, they are of great importance to our future as both a congregation and community. We hope that through offering a myriad of programs on different topics from varying perspectives, all Beth El members will have the opportunity to participate, learn and engage.

The Racial Justice Task Force is open to hearing from the Beth El Community and having members join the planning committee. To learn more, contact Rachel Bearman at rbearman@mebtel.net.