Abstract: Twentieth century Jewish discourses assert a ubiquitous, essential, and normative tradition of Jewish anti-racism. Yet we lack a sustained body of distinctly Jewish reflection on racial issues or extensive suggestions for a nuanced agenda of anti-racism. Persistent accusations of Jewish racism—from theological Judaism to the essence of Zionism—and the emergence of an actual racist Jewish right-wing in America, Israel, and Europe make explicating Jewish anti-racist arguments all the more pressing. In this paper, I set out a Jewish account of anti-racism in theory and practice. Informed by the Mussar tradition, I suggest a series of protocols for considering anti-racism as an issue of character cultivation, a hermeneutical lens, and a Jewish program for social-political action.

Is Judaism a Racist Project?

Jews and Judaism have a race problem. Since the close of World War II and the founding of the State of Israel, Jews have enjoyed privileged racial status in their two most important centers of population, culture, and political influence—America and Israel. Over these decades, Jews, their very religion, and their national political project have been accused of racism yet Judaism as a tradition does not know how to manage these claims, has not gone “on record” as being explicitly against all forms of racial discrimination. Many Jews deny the substance of these accusations of racism, and manage to relegate their professed anti-racism into forms of behavior and advocacies of policies that do not affect the racially privileged status of Jews either in America—where Jews are white—or in Israel where Jews are the hegemonic dominant “racial” caste. Judaism, in its religious, communal, and national mode, has inadequately inventoried its own racialized reasoning, half-step commitments to racial justice, and truncated sense of ethical guidelines for earnest Jews—motivated by religion, reason, ideology, or history—to stand against racism in its myriad forms.

These assertions may come as a shock to the vast number of Jews—especially in America—who have built into their self-conception of Jewish identity a commitment to justice, equal rights, and racial equality. These assertions may also sting as the Jews stand as 20th century Europe’s
quintessential victims of racism, the despised objects of the Nazi program—the apotheosis of Europe’s racial science, colonial reasoning, and nationalist violence.¹ Here I want to sketch this problem in full, noting briefly the various ways in which profound anti-racism has been submerged and domesticated in Jewish religious, ethical, and political discourse. I want to suggest that the revitalized *mussar* tradition can serve as some form of guidance for a deeper, more radical form of Jewish anti-racism, one which absorbs the insights of anti-racist movements and makes anti-racism into a virtue practice.

My assertion that Judaism has a race problem flies in the face of the vast majority of Jewish discourse about race during the 20th century. Jews have been the most visible white American community agitating for racial justice, civil rights, fairness and equality. Though there were sporadic outspoken Jewish voices before the late 19th century—against slavery or Jim Crow, for example—by the first few decades of the 20th century major Jewish spokespeople were frequently vocal in their championing of equal rights for Afro-Americans. From Julius Rosenwald’s partnership with Booker T. Washington in the extraordinary endeavor to fund schools for black children in the South, to the liberal sermons preached by social justice Rabbis, to the coverage of white supremacist violence against blacks in the Yiddish press, it was not hard to see a pattern of communal concern for the victims of “race prejudice” in general and Afro-Americans in particular. After the Holocaust, this pattern of American Jewish commitment to race equality, civil rights, and, in particular, black liberation, has been well-documented.² Jews as a white “ethnic” group have an impressive track record. There are many dots to connect to make a convincing picture of a Jewish commitment to racial justice. Some of those dots are extraordinary individuals—such as those secular Jews of the

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¹ But are the Jews Europe’s primary victims? How many millions of Africans died at the hands of Belgium or millions of Native peoples in the Americas and elsewhere must we mobilize to make the comparison? See Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

² For a popular summation of this narrative, see Jonathan Kaufman, *Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America,* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).
Civil Rights Movement—some are communal papers and press releases—such as the mid-century activity of the American Jewish Congress—some are religious phenomena such as sermons, Freedom Seders, and interracial dialogues. Yet even with this admirable century-long burst of egalitarianism, the Jewish community lacks a sustained body of distinctly Jewish reflection on racial issues or extensive suggestions for a serious agenda of anti-racism from within the Jewish experience.

What “racial justice” looks like—beyond the interpersonal dimension—is rarely spelled out in detail. While my analysis does not seek to diminish the authenticity and importance of the phalanx of Jewish-identified anti-racist activities in the last hundred years, I do want to insist that Judaism in its various forms still has yet to make explicit this anti-racism on its micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Too often, commitment to racial justice are submerged within vague references to tikkun olam or rest unexamined in a litany of fine-sounding, but superficial commitments to “social justice.” Here in this paper, I will address this problem by posing some possible steps towards a substantial Jewish discipline of anti-racism. I will do this in the language of the neo-mussar movement which is concerned with developing character, habits and practices suitable for living a “responsible life.”

First, I want to underline the urgency for this venture, especially in the wake of claims that Judaism as a religion, Jews as a group identity, and Zionism as a political project are shot through with racist practices and indeed help to perpetuate the most intractable forms of racial discrimination.

**Accusations of Judaism as the Source of Racism**

The claims that Judaism is a racist religion, or that its texts are the foundation for racism in the West has, in my estimation, a two-fold lineage. First, there is the rise of Christian anti-racism which wanted to assert some form of racial equality. For centuries Christian theological discourse has diminished Judaism as a “tribal” or “particularistic” religion, in contrast to Christian universalism. Jews through their particularistic customs cultivate a clannishness that keeps them separate from
other peoples. When anti-racist Christians sought to articulate a theological anti-racism, Judaism was a convenient Other that showed, by comparison, Christianity as a more progressive religion; Judaism defined itself in terms of blood ancestry rather than spiritual or ideational membership. The idea of the “Chosen People” was highlighted as a central organizing doctrine of Judaism, a source of racialized reasoning, and a template for more recent forms of chauvinism—from European settlers in the Americas to Nazism to irredentist Zionism. For these Christian voices, Jewish doctrine is the progenitor of racialized theology, bad ideas, and thus odious patterns of prejudice.

Second, are claims that in the sources of Judaism—Torah, Talmud and elsewhere—we find the origins of anti-black prejudice, national supremacy, and the first religiously sanctified colonialist enterprises. These claims emerged as historians and scholars—Afrocentric or otherwise—began to seek out the ideational roots of racism, discerning them in the ancient world in general and in the Jewish Scriptures in particular. David Goldenberg in his article “The Curse of Ham: A Case of Rabbinic Racism?” shows how some scholars have traced the sources of anti-black racism to readings of the “Curse of Ham” episode in Genesis 9, wherein Noah’s son Ham is cursed to be a slave to his brothers. Indeed, the curse has been one of the proof texts to justify African slavery, often run together with the curse of Cain, where the patricidal Cain is “marked” by God with, as some Christian interpreters have it, black skin. Other texts in the Hebrew Bible have indeed been mobilized to forbid interracial relations, justify the subordination of indigenous peoples, and frame hostile racial others as “Canaanites” and “Amalek” deserving of death. Michael Prior, to take one

33 Claiming the “doctrine of election” is imbricated in bigoted reasoning was taken seriously by Mordechai Kaplan and the Reconstructionist movement. A recent anti-Zionist Jew, Mark Braverman, has blamed the problems of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the idea of the chosen people. See his Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews, and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land (Synergy Books: 2010). Braverman’s misconstrues the nature of the doctrine of election here and in many public talks to liberal Christians wishing to hear critical Jewish voices on the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

example, traces the mobilization of the Canaanite conquest in the discourse surrounding various forms of colonialism. Prior and others come close to suggesting that these “Jewish” texts are the ideological origins of European colonialism and this frames their assessment of the history of Zionism.

Here we can see a pattern of locating the origins of racism and colonialism in Jewish texts, doctrines, and practices. Certainly, the Bible abounds in passages of tribal-religious chauvinism as when the various peoples, from Canaanites, Midianites, and Others, are worthy of indiscriminate destruction and domination. The Curse of Ham seems to be an etiological myth explaining the origins of Canaanite subordination, not a Biblical statement about black Africans. The presence of racist jokes and claims of rabbis—there embedded in passages in the Talmud, even in medieval documents like the Kuzari—are hardly evidence of the “origins” of anti-black racism, as if these obscure texts were influential on the Christian mind or gave Jews clear marching orders to initiate the slave trade. While these complaints are often lodged by less-than-trustworthy customers—anti-Semites, embittered anti-Zionists, disgruntled progressive Jews, unsophisticated scholars, Christian triumphalists—I contend that Jewish ethics must nevertheless stop being defensive about these sources and assert a positive position against racism despite the presence of these foundational narratives. It is true that there is much material in the Hebrew Bible for a theological anti-racism. Yet, there is enough source material common to Christians and Jews in the Hebrew Bible to warrant pause. There are building blocks for racism, colonial massacre, and anti-gentile hostility and those blocks are being refashioned

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6 Numbers 12:1-10 seems to be an rebuke to Miriam’s color prejudice against Moses’s “Kushite” wife (which may be a slur about the Midianite Zipporah) where poetic justice has God punishing her with leprosy making her skin “white as snow.” Besides the exhortation to consider the stranger, there are also stray comments in the Prophets that seem to assert a more universal sense of humanity.
today by Israeli Jews who dominate non-Jews. This is why Judaism needs a clear ethic of anti-racism.

**Accusations of Jews as Contributing to Structural Racism**

Kevin McDonald, an evolutionary psychologist and European supremacist, has suggested that Jews are anti-racist in that they help obscure the real order of racial hierarchy in their own interest. Jews such as anthropologist Franz Boas, for example, spread ideas of racial equality in order to obscure their own objectives for group domination. McDonald argues that Jews are responding to their own group biological concerns by promoting race-equality. In other words, Jews are anti-racist, but just enough to disarm other “races” while the Jews surge ahead. Of course McDonald’s ideas are outlandish and impolite, yet they reflect an academically, even scientific-sounding, version of ideas that have some traction in recent discourses in the Muslim world. Consider that in 2003, the then prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, said in a speech that the Jews “invented socialism, communism, human rights and democracy, so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong, so that they can enjoy equal rights with others.” The “invention” of Human Rights, recent historians have noted, does contain an outsized number of Jews (and Catholics) who helped shepherd their international legitimation. This is something Jews might feel a sense of communal pride. By the same token, Jews had some role to play in the creation and perpetuation of European race science just as Jews had a significant role in undermining that science’s legitimacy.

If we—rightfully—bemoan such discourse as anti-Semitism, it ought not to distract us from the serious accusations by some anti-racist voices that Jewish social justice discourse also functions to obscure Jewish complacency in racist actions, hierarchies, and structures. Too often, the admirable

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7 For such comments see, for example, Jeffrey Goldberg, “Among the Settlers,” *New Yorker*, May 31, 2004. See also Gadi Taub, *The Settlers*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010).
record of Jewish Civil Rights work has been used as a shield to dismiss more serious silences about
the patterns of structural violence. For example, Bernie Sanders’s initial response to the
BlackLivesMatter movement’s interruption of his speech to address police violence was “Black lives,
_of course_, matter. I spent fifty years of my life fighting for civil rights and for dignity! But if you don’t’
want me to be here that’s O.K. I don’t want to outcream people.”\(^\text{10}\) Though Sanders has become
more receptive to the issues raised by those activists, his initial impulse is one that pervades
American Jewish defensiveness about Jewish complicity in structural racism. This accusation of
inadequacy has been made most poignantly by Jews—mostly American—of color who are in a
distinct position to observe that white Jews have a tendencies to downplay their “whiteness” while
enjoying white privilege in American society.\(^\text{11}\) Black Jews, in turn, are treated as a puzzle in everyday
encounters. “So how did you become Jewish?” is a frequently asked question of black Jews in white
Jewish spaces.\(^\text{12}\) Meanwhile, white Jews often side with the structural racism that enables them the
privileges to announce their commitment to racial equality, while, for example, fretting about how
affirmative action policies may curtail their own prospects for educational or professional
advancement. Though white Jews are not a conspiracy or a group evolutionary juggernaut bent on
societal domination, in obscuring their own outsized presence in American political and professional
life, fail to account for how Jews actually came to flourish. Instead of whiteness, it was Jewish values,
or education, or hard work, they say. “I’m not white, I’m Jewish” they say. Or in a recent
instantiation of this, a Princeton student, Tal Fortgang, insisted that the whole regiment of discourse
around “white privilege” is a sham, since, after all, the Jews suffered too and his grandparents

\(^{10}\) Quoted in Margaret Talbot, “The Populist Prophet,” _New Yorker_, October 12, 2015, p. 67.
\(^{11}\) See, for example, the commentary by Manistana at www.manishtana.net, “What Side Should Jewish-Americans Take
on Ferguson?” is a good place to start: http://manishtana.net/2014/11/26/what-side-should-jewish-americans-take-on-ferguson/
\(^{12}\) For an assessment and treatment of this phenomenon, see Diane Tobin, Tobin, Gary, Rudin, Scott eds. _In Every
Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People_, (San Francisco: The Institute for Jewish & Community Research,
2005), especially the testimony of Lewis Gordon.
survived the Holocaust, and look where he is now, today.\textsuperscript{13} Fortgang’s assertions are just the tip of a grotesque iceberg of Jewish racial reasoning that has cooled to the struggles of racial minorities.\textsuperscript{14} These self-congratulatory and self-serving rationales are underwritten by an alleged “disadvantage” in being Jewish in America when the one great advantage—whiteness—is never factored into their narrative. Jews are beneficiaries of tremendously successful sites of mutual aid, thick networks of professional contacts, and the racial privileges of whiteness. Jewish Americans are “social capital”-ists while pretending to live in a liberal equal opportunity society, as if there is a “socialism of rights” rather than a surfeit of structural violence against non-whites. The visible results of this unacknowledged opportunity gap led to Jewish disappointment over the failures of integration, angry black voices about white-or Jewish-domination of their own liberation movements, and the retreat of Jews to all-white suburban enclaves, so as to not bare the brunt of the failures of liberal capitalism’s impact on urban disorder. On a less theoretical level, Jews are to be praised “as Jews” for sacrificing for Civil Rights, while Jews who retard racial progress are not to be counted as “as Jews.” This narrative renders invisible those Jewish agents of structural racism—from prosecuting attorneys and real estate moguls, owners of check-cashing chains and captains of predatory financial industries. In the minds of anti-racist Jews, those people “just happen to be” Jewish, and thus are not the objects of Jewish ethical rebuke.

Of course, there is nothing ideological “Jewish” about the doings of a Jewish small business owner or landlord, but then again, there may be nothing ideologically “Jewish” about the secular Jewish Communist or Civil Rights worker. It is my intention to make Jewish ethics explicit about its commitments to anti-racism.

\textsuperscript{14} See “Who is Donald Sterling and how did he Become Synonymous with Bigotry?” Forward, April 29, 2014. One swallow does not make spring, but we also see in France a revitalized \textit{Jewish Defense League} in response to violence against Jews.
**Accusations of Zionism as a Racist Project**

Since the 1975 UN Resolution placing Zionism in a long list of phenomena designated forms of racial discrimination—as well as Zionism’s being signaled out for special opprobrium by radical voices within the black power movements—Jews have been on the defensive about Israel. For the Jew of the 1970s, the accusation that the State of Israel was engaging in racism, or that Zionism was inherently racist was an accusation that defied the Jewish-American imagination. In response, defenders of the State of Israel insisted that there was no pervasive racism in the State, and that Zionism was indeed a “national liberation” movement as legitimate, and perhaps as sexy, as the decolonizing movements that lead to the establishment of many African and Asian states. Israel was just like the decolonizing nations of the Third World, not like the colonizing forces of Europe.

To the Jew of the 2000s, however, we have available a much more accessible historical record about the ideological patterns in Zionism and the harmful policies of the State. That record suggests a history of Zionism that resembles the racial reasoning of colonialism, a liberal Zionist discourse that reflects the structural racism of liberalism, and a feral Zionism wherein racist violence is manifest and chronic in the State of Israel itself as well as the occupied territories.

Many Jews wince when they hear the language of colonialism among Zionism’s founding fathers from Herzl to Ben Gurion. While framing Zionism as an analytically uncomplicated case of settler-colonialism is a seriously debatable point, the aftermath of the Six Day War and the settler-colonialist land-grabs of Israeli Jews in the West Bank is a different story. For generations of anti-racist Jews, the recent language of bigotry and chauvinism we hear from the leaders of the State of

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Israel are a scandal. In the 2010s, Israel observers have insisted that proposed anti-Arab legislation is “anti-democratic”—that Israel is facing a crisis of democracy.\(^{17}\) To read about Israeli Jews shouting “Death to Arabs” or Jews refusing to rent to Arab Israelis or the endless anxiety about “Jewish demographics” makes anti-racist American Jews aghast. Yet equally disturbing are the range of discriminatory laws and practices that the State of Israel has engaged in towards its own citizens since its founding. Here I am thinking of the placing of the Arab citizens of Israel under military governance from 1949 until 1966, the two-tier system of development and integration, and of course the well-documented discrimination of Jews from the Middle East. The Mizrahis whose Middle Eastern cultures were described at the time as backwards, uncivilized, and where Iraqi school teachers, French speaking Moroccan doctors, and Yemenite villagers were all thrown into the same basket of racial otherness by the Israeli State during the 1950s.\(^{18}\) Such laws—against Arabs—and patterns of prejudice—against non-Ashkenazi Jews—have been widely documented, but often neutered as necessary for state security concerns or part of the “imperfections” of a young, besieged democracy.

Meanwhile, indiscriminate racialized violence against Palestinians in the West Bank is relegated to the fanaticism of a few, or the understandable excessive response to “Palestinian” terror.\(^{19}\) In the main, unless one is an Israeli academic, to describe these patterns as “racism” is to receive a convoluted response that Arabs are not a “race” and that the State of Israel allows for many people of different races, as long as they are Jews. The inability to assimilate non-Jewish and non-Arab

\(^{17}\) For just the tip of the iceberg, see Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*, (New York: Picador, 2012).


\(^{19}\) For one such account see Eetta Prince-Gibson, “High in the Hills,” *Jerusalem Report*, January 17, 2011.
guest workers, refugees, and asylum seekers is explained as a necessary security measure and/or an issue of keeping an eye on the demographic balance between Jew and non-Jew in Israel.

A vocal fringe of American Jewish voices can be heard supporting black Americans’ complaints about over-policing, the surveillance state, the “new Jim Crow.” Jewish voices have rightfully bemoaned the effects of criminalization of American racial minorities, security surveillance abuses, and entrapments of Muslim citizens, and the effects—both psychological and communal—of prison on a generation of black and brown youths. Yet these critical lenses must be turned to how we see the practices of the State of Israel. If law enforcement and “tough on crime” advocates say it is for the public good of law-and-order, the State of Israel makes excuses for its structural violence in the name of security. The Israeli “matrix of control” is no less racist than the American “New Jim Crow” yet the American Jewish community refuses to see the points of comparison.20

The Zionist project may not be inherently racist or colonialist. Israel may be just like every other country managing its relationship between majority and minority populations.21 Most of the accusations against Zionism and the State of Israel may be exaggerated or hyperbole. However, Jewish ethics must take seriously these accusations of racism. All of these canards require that Jews have a ready answer to these claims that are not flip, un-nuanced, or facile in a defensive tone.22 Oftentimes, Jewish-Israeli racism is sidelined as aberrant or understandable. Professional white supremacist Kevin McDonald quipped, “among the Jewish proponents of Israel and they will never feel cognitive dissonance for supporting an apartheid ethnostate in Israel while simultaneously being

20 The phrase “Matrix of Control” circulated by Jeff Halper. See his An Israeli in Palestine X
21 For a strong left-Zionist critique of the accusations of colonialism, see Bernard Avishai’s “Zionist Colonialism: Myths and Dilemmas” in A New Israeli Democracy in Crisis, 1973-1988, (New York: Ticknor Fields, 1990), pp. 179-195
a pillar of support for a utopian vision of a multicultural U.S.”23 Such claims should shock us into reexamining the range and depth of our commitments to anti-racism in the entire Jewish world, not just America.

Judaism must articulate a clear commitment to anti-racism, a mechanism of discerning how to identify racist practices and programs, and a process of responding both as individuals and as a community to these problems. How this might be done in practice needs more discussion. Here I would like to offer some suggestions drawn from the mussar tradition.

The Intersection of Anti-Racism and Virtue Practice

In the 1960s, Steven Schwarzschild who asserted that “the Civil Rights Movement and messianic Judaism are at one” rejected an alliance predicated on “grateful” blacks who lived up to Jewish expectation. For Schwarzschild, instances of black anti-Semitism was not a “dealbreaker,” explaining,

> Israel is not in this game on a ‘tit-for-tat’ basis. Were this the case, we would have had to abandon the striving for mankind’s good life a long time ago. We must continue to enact an attitude of complete color-blindness and a dedication to the total abolition of social injustices, regardless of the cost to us.24

“Regardless of the cost to us” is an unpopular condition for nervous community members who fret about anti-Semitism, Jewish safety, and Jewish survival.

So it is precisely as a buffer to the yetzer hara, the “material inclination” towards communal self-interest that the “spiritual” commitment of anti-racism is most important.

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In the last decade, a “neo-mussar” school of thought—headed my Rabbi Ira Stone of Philadelphia—has emerged in American Jewish circles wherein some of the practices of the original mussar movement have been revitalized by using the language of Emmanuel Levinas who was himself profoundly influenced by the mussar tradition, often quoting mussar sages such as Israel Salanter and Chaim of Volozhin.\(^{25}\)

This neo-mussar has utilized the language and techniques of the classical mussar movement but within a Levinasian frame: the categories of the Other and the “Same,” the logic of the Third, “bearing the burden of the Other” and attending to the “infinite responsibility” to the Other. Stone’s mussar framework has actualized a distinct Jewish form of virtue practice, suitably modern in its concern for this-worldly ethics and retooled for non-orthodox Jewish circles.

In what I am calling neo-mussar, we speak of the Yetzer hara and Yetzer tov—two contrary forces pulling on the human self in acts of decision and habit. Though often translated as the bad or evil inclination, Stone has reframed this as a “material” inclination—the impulse, the legitimate impulse—that the self has for self-preservation. This is the yetzer described in the Talmud (Yoma 69b) as necessary for the functioning of life. A captured Yetzer Harab notes “Realize that if you kill me, the world is finished.” Chickens fail to lay eggs. No yetzer, no eggs. The yetzer is necessary for the functioning of the world, for without the yetzer, “one would not build a house, marry, beget children, or engage in business." (Bereishit Rabba 9:7) The yetzer hara then is dangerous, not evil, and needs to be managed by Torah—broadly defined—through disciplines of reflection, observance, and group support.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{26}\) In the Philadelphia Mussar groups that I have been involved with, I have overheard concerns that some have had, is that, like the original mussar movement,—which became obsessed with the purity of its adherents with regards to sex, speech, and spiritual matters—the new mussar movement, though not exactly a self-help enterprise, has contained its concerns to small bore interpersonal work. Learning to be patient on the phone with the airlines, more stoic in traffic
In the mussar text *Cheshbon Ha Nefesh*, the accounting of the soul, Mendel of Satanov’s 1812 midrash on Ben Franklin’s table of virtue, he lists *Tzedek* as Hillel’s maxim from Shabbat 31a “what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbors.” How then can we construe an anti-racist practice? How do we cultivate the character for racial justice?

There is the often discussed necessity to reframe problems of race. Abraham Joshua Heschel observed that “racism is an eye disease” and, according to Levinas, “ethics is an optics”: a different way of seeing people and your responsibilities to them. This reframing has often been discursive, to see all as equal, colorblind. Yet the deeper needs of anti-racist work require us also “to see” the historical conditions, structuring factors, and contingent contexts that have lead us to see “the Other” in a certain way, and to comprehend the hostility of the Other in its proper frame. It is a hermeneutical act which requires historical consciousness.

It is here that I would like to suggest some tentative connections between the mussar movement’s emphasis on daily practices, character traits (or virtue), the larger commitment of Jews to “social justice,” and the specific demands of anti-racism. I will suggest six protocols on three levels of moral action: the personal, the group, and the structural.

**Protocols of an Ethics of Anti-Racism**

The first protocol of a Jewish anti-racism is then to see the Other not merely as an extension of my own self and what I desire, but in the Other’s alterity, as all people are, an agent structured by history, social forces, and personal biography of trauma of which I cannot completely understand. The alterity of the jam or being more reflective before one speaks in anger to relatives are all good skills, but their application to issues of justice has been underutilized.

27 Interestingly, Franklin’s aphorism for justice reads: “Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.” For the Franklin-Mussar connection see Nancy Sinkoff, “Benjamin Franklin in Jewish Eastern Europe: Cultural Appropriation in the Age of the Enlightenment,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61.1 (2000) 133-152.
Other, the unknowability of the Other, should give us pause. We should resist speaking for the Other. Seeing a person as unique but also structured by legible historical forces in no way takes away from listening to the Other and their story.

Levinasian pronouncements about the Other translate into an practice of training oneself to appreciate difference, rather than to see that difference as a threat to one’s own self, rather than seeking out some mythical and mystical “sameness” on which to predicate solidarity, as in the liberal cliché “we are all the same under the skin.” This makes “the skin” an unfortunate variable, politely overlooked, and thereby denigrating the importance of difference, and submerging real disjuncture between one’s own experience and another’s.

The Second protocol: we should train ourselves to recognize the power-imbalances between groups—especially racial and national groups—and adjust our actions accordingly. Too often self-proclaimed anti-racists await vulgar racism to condemn “on either side” while ignoring the chronic power imbalances that persist between Jews and blacks, Jews and Palestinians, Jews and Muslims. In Israel, Jews are essentially “white,” and hold a near monopoly on State power, social status, and economic domination. Jews are also alienated from their Arab neighbors by language, geography, and historical grievance. A Jewish reaction ought to incorporate these alienations into its calculations. Too often discussions of intergroup conflict is “tit-for-tat”—Jewish support is predicated on the absence of black hostility or that Israelis should recognize only those Palestinian partners who do what we want and say what Jews want (such as “Israel is a Jewish State”) or despair at the first impolitic utterance by a Palestinian leader. When faced with murderous anti-Semites or
unthinking outbreaks of violence, Jews ought not to chant “Jewish blood is not cheap” but that “all blood is equal.”

Third protocol, and here the mussar work comes to the surface, we ought to cultivate the character traits, the middot, that best accompany the day-to-day anti-racist work. I need patience to deal with the hostility of the Other—I am also responsible for the Other’s responsibility—and I need courage to intervene against racism even when that makes me the enemy of the people.

Mussar discipline trains one for the clarity of mind to deal with the insults of the ignorant, and the misplaced violence of the dominated. Humility is needed to realize my own power—as male, as Jewish—as so many white Jewish activists were overbearing in SNCC meetings, self-assured to the point of disruptive, and self-righteous to the point of destructive. Humility: to listen, to weigh, to deliberate, and to realize my perspective is always fallible, limited.

Fourth protocol, Jews should toggle back and forth between modern historical examples: of our own subordinations and tragedies in Christian Europe, to the case studies of colonialism, to the voices—often harsh and resentful—of the Other who sees us as colonizers, as white people, or even as perfidious Jews. In the search for best practices, we must keep in mind the lessons of history, but also that the Other who is in front of us needs to be seen not merely an indomitable hostile position, a hostile fifth column, but as an agent whose own understanding is in progress, who can be transformed through concern and solidarity. Our comportment towards the Other—as Jews—effects how Jews are understood. Given our class position, our absence from struggling black or brown people except as professional helpers—case workers, teachers, lawyers, and so forth—demands we double down on our willingness to correct the structural imbalances that place people

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28 “Jewish blood is not cheap” was a keynote line of a speech given by the grieving brother of Yankel Rosenbaum, a Jewish victim of the Crown Heights riots of July 1991.
of color, at worst, as recipients of the charity of our pity or the disinterestedness of our contempt. A more apt comportment, to “accompany” the Other in their struggles, need not be the end of thought or the cessation of dialogue. Total subordination of self to the Other is not what Levinas, or justice, suggests. However, we too often err on the side of self-protection, and thus are left vulnerable in the face of challenges to our privilege as Jews, as white, as Israelis. All this requires a shifting perspective, some anti-racist training, and a great deal of patience.

Fifth protocol: We must inaugurate a mussar practice that would deal with *Lasbon harab* (bad speech) when it comes to racialized differences. On the interpersonal level, there is much African-American literature on attending to the daily slights of race. W.E.B. Du Bois summarized even polite out-of-the-way remarks towards him as a racialized subject as essentially asking, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Such interactions, microaggressions, “flutter round,” contribute and reinforce Du Bois’s alienation, his double consciousness. As mentioned white Jewish interactions with black Jews are the most glaring instances of Jewish insensitivity to people of color.30

Certainly the mussar tradition could mobilize the middah of silence (*shteekah*), but to enact the specific details of race in various contexts requires attention, training, regard to case studies and, most importantly, listening to those racialized subjects, like Du Bois, who often hold their tongue, “reduce the boiling to a simmer”31 in the face of well-meaning, but hurtful interactions.

In the Israeli context, Jews have to be considerate of the way in which we speak of- and of course interact with- Palestinians, who are subordinate to Jewish power and hegemony. Israelis speak of “our Arabs” at best, “the Arabs” less so, but always in group terms, as objects of regard rather than as fellow citizens to whom we are obliged. When we speak of “Israelis” we mean “Jewish Israelis” to the exclusion of the non-Jewish Israeli, in a similar way that Southerners would speak of Negro

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31 X
citizens as people less than full stakeholders in the American project—as temporary residents. We see the same when talking about final status solutions, as Arab Israelis are discussed, and dismissed as demographic objects, whose towns are ready to be redrawn into another polity without their consultation. These forms of speech are alienating, hurtful to us if the tables were turned as they were in the past few centuries. They are also racist in that they designate status based on being, patterns of descent linked to enduring character traits.

How often have Jewish audiences heard from right-wing speakers that Israeli Arabs are fixed as unsuitable for full integration into the Jewish State? That Arabs, in general, are incapable of democracy—a familiar colonial trope that denies reason, maturity, and capacity to entire groups of people based on ancestry. Blacks too, from Haiti to Harlem were assumed unsuitable for self-rule, citizenship, to stand equally with white nations and white neighbors. Africans themselves continue to be objects of pity, requiring white—or Jewish—know-how, uplift, and charity.

Sixth protocol: Jews have to work through the challenge of structural racism. Since Jews are a thoroughly empowered community in America and in Israel, it goes without saying that our communal institutions ought to support right policies, legislation, and resource support to fight structural racism, not merely interpersonal prejudice. Though the Jewish establishment does advocate for a strong welfare state, immigration reform, mild resource redistribution—in the guise of its support for the Democratic Party—much more could be done. From the vertical view of structure, rather than horizontal view of the lifeworld, the systemic problems that vex people of color are most legible in residential segregation—with its attendant reduction in life-chances, social capital, poor schools—discrimination in employment, predatory economic relationships, and barriers to public resources.

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32 I have heard this from…X
A primary source of racial inequality in the United States is the war on drugs and the prison-industrial complex, with its attendant evils so aptly documented in law professor Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*: black men in and out of prison, stigmatized for life as felons, disenfranchisement, unable to acquire goods and services from the state for education, housing, or employment, the list goes on.

In Israel, Palestinians face similar patterns of discrimination in housing, education, voting, and municipal services. Keeping Arabs out of the Army, one staple of advancement in Israeli society, hearkens back to the exclusion of blacks from trade unions—both have the effect of tampering down life-chances of entire groups of people. Palestinians are always a problem in the Jewish state.

Calls for changing the structures and complexes of inequality are empty without some actionable component. Changes in legislation, policy, and redistribution of resources are all well and good, but where does the individual fit into these calls? How can one develop a principled anti-racist character in the face of such overwhelming structural edifices?

Jews must ever locate our roles in the larger system that perpetuates inequality. American Jews have tremendous roles to play in the professions, including those professions—law, education, government—that perpetuate inequality. How many would willingly reform the property-tax basis of school funding as it threatens to undermine one’s own school district? How many would give up careers as prosecutors to offer legal advice to people accused of crime? Doing the right thing, standing against racism, cannot be a mere gesture of convenience—the responsible life entails sacrifice.

Justice demands that we seek to untangle ourselves from these webs of domination. We would expect that the truly good German would take risks to depart from the Nazi racial state’s total
mobilization—acts that often required sacrifice and courage by resisters—so too ought we to figure how we as Jews can intervene in the structures of American racism and Israeli chauvinism.

Martin Luther King Jr. in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” asserted that “Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an ‘I it’ relationship for an ‘I thou’ relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.”33 If we accept that racism is bad, opposing racism is desired. But opposing racism cannot merely be an intellectual stance as in “I disagree with the propositions of racial hierarchy,” it must also have some practical component. It must be also a matter of cultivating the character to become a resister to oppression, to resist making racialized people mere things, and to resist the temptation to default to one’s own self-interest, or group interest, when the chips are down.

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I will anticipate several objections. First, my account of what is “racism” and what is not, is underdeveloped and unbalanced. This is true. Though I reject some transhistorical force called “racism” there are clearly practices, beliefs, and arrangements that we can point to and say, “yes, this is really bad.” Slavery, Colonial Massacre, and the Holocaust are our touchstones and they are interrelated. As Arendt called to our attention in The Origins of Totalitarianism, Nazi racism has a substantial precedent in colonial mentalities and practices.34 Nazi utopianism also has at its precedent, as Tim Snyder has called to our attention in Bloodlands, the conquest of the Americas and the establishment of a slave society in the South. Though I reject the canard that Zionism is merely settler colonialism, colonial practices are everywhere still operative. As Aziza Kahzzoom has shown, orientalism—a version of which was the scaffolding of European anti-Semitism—was turned on the non-Ashkenazi populations: Palestinians, the Mizrachim, and the Ethiopians, sometimes in linked

33 King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in…
“chains” of orientalism. Racial reasoning may differ in the particulars between Israel and America, but the overall logic—sexual panic, diseased blood, color prejudice, dangerous demographics, low expectations—looks similar. If we oppose these logics, if we seek to restructure these societies, if we have learned from Jewish experience in Europe, we cannot wince from the evidence that Jews or Israelis fall prey to racial reason and support—sometimes blindly—social structures that disadvantage whole, less powerful, groups. Good Germans, kindly masters, liberal Israelis, colorblind Americans. All must do more to dismantle the structures that keep whole groups powerless.

Second, I have asserted that anti-racist action demands a distinctly Jewish intervention; though it may seem that I have not yet accomplished the task of providing a distinctly Jewish twist—theological or otherwise—that non-Jews might have developed as well. It does seem that I am making a supererogatory demand for Jews to disarm Jewish self-interest in the interest of “the Other.” As Levinas, quoting Dostoevsky, proclaimed that “We are all responsible for everyone, and I more than all others,” Jews should focus on their own radical responsibility without worrying about if that responsibility is being “spread” equally. Even so, this radical responsibility might indeed be requisite on all peoples, articulated from within their own vocabularies and for their own reasons. The Afrikaans Communist Bram Fischer articulated his own anti-Apartheid activism with reference to Afrikaans traditions and history; the 19th century Irish agitator Daniel O’Connell exhorted his now-American Landsman to stand against slavery with reference to Irish history and national pride; so too Jews, religious and secular, ought to articulate an anti-racist agenda that takes seriously Jewish tradition and Jewish history, warts and all…regardless of the costs.

36 Fischer’s role is discussed in Glenn Frankel, Rivonia’s Children, (London: Continuum: 2001).
Jewish texts contain the building blocks for racial and national chauvinisms, just as they contain building blocks for liberatory movements. Jews have helped perpetuate ideological and structural racism just as Jews have helped significantly in undermining those ideologies and fighting those structures. Zionism has elements of settler-colonialism, and the State of Israel perpetuates a structural racism against Arabs; Zionism also at times contains a vision of modernist egalitarianism and has grown anti-racist voices who, speaking in the name of Zionism, seek an end to the racial reasoning that pervades the culture of the Jewish State. These ambivalences are prime facie reasons why articulating a Jewish—theological or communal—commitment to practical anti-racism is imperative. This articulation should follow the lead of American Jews of color, best positioned to see the limitations of white liberal Jewish anti-racism as well as the voices of non-Ashkenazi citizens and residents of the State of Israel. I have here suggested that practical anti-racism can be formulated as a set of virtue practices, but these suggestions are meaningless without a viable and vocal communal commitment to resisting injustice and inequality grounded in status and ancestry. We think of ourselves as anti-racist; now it is time for disciplined personal and communal actions to match our noble self-perception.

38 For a helpful shorthand, see Jared Jackson, “Eight Pitfalls to Avoid when Being an Ally to Jews of Color,” The Forward, August 31, 2015.