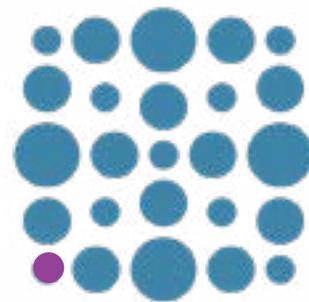


Backgrounder

Can Jews Support Black Lives Matter?



David Ben Moshe

Does My Life Matter?

“If you are pulled over by the police, do not do anything to surprise them or make them more suspicious,” my father, a Black man raised in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville and East Flatbush sections of Brooklyn, NYC told me during our driving lesson. He taught me to pull over quickly, roll down all the windows, keep my hands in plain sight and “be pleasant, do not curse at them, and use ‘sir’ and ‘officer’ when addressing them. If not, bad things can happen to you, including getting shot, and their word will be taken over yours. That’s the way of the world these days.”

Growing up in America, I never felt like my life mattered. I learned that police could kill me because Black men were a threat. I learned that other Black men might kill me because I resembled a Black man they wanted to murder. I learned that racist white men might want to kill me — for sport.

An idea I recalled every time I saw a Confederate flag, a common sight on shirts, hats, and pickup trucks in rural Maryland, where I grew up.

Upon reaching puberty, I didn’t just learn about the birds and the bees; I also learned that white women were potential hazards. My parents used the story of Joseph and



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San Francisco Bay Area Jews shut down Market St. for #ChanukahAction.

Potiphar’s wife, where a slave is imprisoned after being wrongfully accused by his master’s wife of making a sexual advance toward her, to teach me the possible result of being alone with a white woman.

My destiny was to die young or end up in prison. If I worked hard at school, hid inside the house, and prayed hard enough, there was a chance I could avoid the fate marked by my skin color. I struggled with these rules, and the only future I could see for myself was as a dead nigger¹.

It is hard to maintain the will to live or act positively when you feel your life doesn’t matter. So it isn’t surprising that when I first heard the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” the words immediately spoke to my damaged soul. That simple, beautiful phrase gave me hope that my life could matter in America. Hope that one day I wouldn’t have to live my life with a constant fear of death.

Do Jews care about Black lives?

A few years ago, my Rabbi called to ask for advice. He wanted to go to a BLM rally to show his support for the social movement. But he was offended by statements made by some of the affiliated organizations.

“I want to go, I support the ideals of Black lives matter [social movement] and racial equality, but after the (Movement for Black Lives) [statement](#) from various Black

Police Brutality Against Blacks Is Not A New Phenomenon

After multiple high-profile fatal incidents between Black victims and law enforcement officers, Black Americans led a public campaign calling attention to an issue the Black community has faced for decades. What became public three decades ago with the assault on Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers seemed to become more prevalent, or at least started receiving more media attention nearly ten years ago. The BLM movement vocalized concerns about community-law enforcement relations that many in the Black American community have held for generations.

1. While the n-word is vulgar, even when used by a Black man such as myself, it is the only word that truly conveys how I felt about myself at the time. Therefore I decided to write it out explicitly in the hope that the reader will be able to share my feelings.

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Lives Matter organizations accusing Israel of genocide against the Palestinians, I don't know if I can show support and associate with such organizations."

It is not surprising that he wanted to go. Many Jews strongly support the BLM social movement, just as many Jews were deeply involved with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Even back then, it was not a new phenomenon; there has been a strong Jewish voice advocating for Africans and their descendants going back to at least 1902. That is the year when Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, wrote in his book *Altneuland*:

There is still one question arising out of the disaster of the nations which remains unsolved to this day, and who profound tragedy only a Jew can comprehend. This is the African question. Just call to mind all those terrible episodes of the slave trade, of human beings who merely because they were black, were stolen like cattle, taken prisoner, captured and sold. Their children grew up in strange lands, the objects of contempt and hostility because their complexions were different. I am not ashamed to say, though I may expose myself to ridicule in saying so that once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my own people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans.

Responding to his question, I first acknowledged the difficulty of his predicament. There is no easy or "right" way to deal with people who share your view on one idea but vehemently disagree with you on another. Especially when the issue you disagree on is, in your opinion, the only morally acceptable stance.

Then, I added that it would be tough for me to go to an event associated with that statement about Israel. But it would also be tough for me to distance myself from the movement fighting for Black lives in America. The difference-maker, for me, would be whether I could show up as I am — I wouldn't take off my *kippah*, skullcap, to attend.

What is BLM trying to accomplish?

The greatest success of BLM is reminding America that we still struggle with issues of racism and discrimination today. The abolishment of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1808 was real progress. Still, it did not give Black Americans the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

More than half a century later, in 1865, with the abolishment of slavery, the situation improved again, and in 1868, the 14th amendment was added to the Constitution, giving all citizens "equal" rights using the clear words:

Where Does Black Lives Matter Come From

Black Lives Matter, or BLM, started on July 13, 2013, when Alicia Garza posted [a message](#) containing the phrase "Black lives matter" on her Facebook page. The post expressed her deep grief at the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who killed Trayvon Martin, a young Black man.

On February 26, 2012, Martin was returning from [7-Eleven with Skittles](#) and an iced tea when Zimmerman saw him. Zimmerman, a Hispanic volunteer Neighborhood Watch person — armed with a gun — believed Martin was "suspicious." He [called the police](#), who told him there was no need to follow the man he saw, but Zimmerman ignored the dispatcher.

Soon afterward, there was an [altercation](#). When the dust settled, Martin had been shot dead, and Zimmerman appeared to have had his nose broken. Zimmerman claimed it was not murder but self-defense, and a jury acquitted him.

In response to Garza's post, her friend, Patrice Cullors, responded with #BlackLivesMatter, and the hashtag was born. But #BlackLivesMatter was still far from mainstream; according to [research](#) conducted by the Pew Research Center, the hashtag appeared about 30 times a day during the second half of 2013.

Then came the 2014 killing of Michael Brown. In the three weeks following Brown's death, the hashtag appeared roughly 60,000 times a day. The day after news broke that the officer who killed Brown would not be indicted, the count almost tripled to more than 170,000 daily. Since that day, the hashtag has maintained a strong presence on social media and occupied a hallowed place in American culture.

Soon the hashtag evolved into something bigger. Now those three words also refer to a slogan, a political action committee, a set of protests, policies related to policing, a decentralized political and social movement, or one of many organizations, the most prominent being the Black Lives Matter Global Network.

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

But the courts found no conflict between that statement and Jim Crow laws, which continued marginalizing Black Americans for close to a century.

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In the 1950s and 1960s, America took additional steps forward by passing multiple Civil Rights Acts. But it is clear that we have not fully realized Dr. King's dream of a nation where children "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." The most visible example is America's criminal justice system, which continues to perpetuate unacceptable disparities.

Another success of BLM is the transformation of awareness into dollars. Even if the way these resources have been used is questionable, it has proved that Black activists can raise significant amounts. [The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation](#), the public charity arm of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, [claims](#) to have raised \$90 million in 2020. Another organization, [The Black Lives Matter Foundation](#), raised over \$4 million.

Also, policy aims differ within the broader Black Lives Matter movement. Despite their almost identical names, the organizations mentioned above have opposing worldviews. **The Black Lives Matter Global Network** advocates for [defunding the police](#), but **The Black Lives Matter Foundation** [wants](#) "to help bring the police and the community closer together in an effort to save lives." This disagreement is a clear example of diverging views of organizations claiming to be part of the same social movement.

The mainstream media often highlights the leadership of **The Black Lives Matter Global Network**. Following the murder of George Floyd, [BuzzFeed](#) accused **The Black Lives Matter Foundation** of not being affiliated with "the movement" because of the difference in views over the role of the police in society.

BuzzFeed notes that **The Foundation** registered for its name in 2015, two years before **The Network** was registered. Despite registering their name first, most of an estimated \$4.35 million that **The Foundation** raised on GoFundMe was frozen before being distributed — following the inquiries by BuzzFeed.

What do BLM and the Jews think of each other?

In 2016, the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) [published](#) a platform co-written by 60 organizations, including a large cross-section of BLM organizations, stating their specific vision for transforming the American political system.

One of its policy positions was ending U.S. federal aid for Israel because the financial support makes the United States "complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people." The document went on to describe Israel as "an apartheid state." The M4BL eventually removed the [original statement](#) from their website.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) [argues](#) that the M4BL is a "subset" of the movement, and that "this is not the consensus position of the entire movement." The JCPA notes that "the majority of action and policy positions on such issues as poverty, police, healthcare, food security, and education are determined locally."

Others disagree and believe that anti-Semitism is already rampant in the movement. These critics cite events such as BLM [activists protesting](#) for Palestine and [unprovoked attacks](#) on people wearing yarmulkes at BLM rallies.

Some go as far as saying that anti-Semitism has been a part of the movement since its inception. Cullors, the previously mentioned

hashtag creator, co-founder of The Black Lives Matter Global Network, and its first executive director, cites Angela Davis as a mentor in an interview with [TeenVogue](#). A prominent civil rights activist, Davis is also a long-standing supporter of the [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions \(BDS\) movement](#).

The truth is that there has always been an extreme element in the movement for civil rights that has held anti-Semitic views. While the extremist leaders have never been the dominant force of the civil rights movement, neither have they always been on the fringe. For example, The Million Man March was organized by [Louis Farrakhan](#), a virulent anti-Semite.



Flyer for lecture at University of Maryland following the Michael Brown killing the previous year.

Is BLM worth supporting?

Recently, Black Lives Matter has come under intense scrutiny for its use of funds. [The New York Post](#) criticized Cullors for spending millions of dollars on home purchases between 2016 and 2021. Cullors denies this money came from BLM, and there is currently no evidence that this money came from BLM coffers. Outside of her work for the movement, Cullors has published a bestselling memoir and has other media-related deals of unknown value. In the wake of the controversy, Cullors stepped down but [told the Associated Press](#) that her decision was not influenced by the reports, which she referred to as a smear campaign.

This year, [New York magazine](#) uncovered suspicious real estate deals directly related to the Black Lives Matters Global Foundation. The claims revolve around a \$6 million mansion that the movement allegedly tried to hide from the public. Many criticized the organization including Karen Attiah, a Black opinion columnist at the Washington Post, [who stated](#): “For years, people marched, got tear-gassed, donated and put their lives on the line in the hopes of Black emancipation — not a Black influencer McMansion.”

Accusations of misused funds and the embracing of anti-Semitism against specific BLM organizations and officials have caused people to become disillusioned with “Black Lives Matter” in general; many are unable or unwilling to separate organizations from the cause. When asked about

BLM organizations, Dr. Brandy Shufutinsky, a Black Jewish woman, replied:

I think the movement brought to light issues of police brutality against Black Americans—however, because of the corruption and lack of structure and strategy, there have been no real positive impacts. In fact, it can be argued that BLM has now become harmful due to the corruption of the leadership and parents of slain Black Americans [publicly speaking](#) against the organization.

For many, a movement is bigger than any single organization, no matter how much power and influence that organization wields. While many organizations represent the ideals of the Zionist movement, the most powerful and influential among them is the government of Israel. Governmental mismanagement and corruption do not discredit the ideology of the Zionist movement. And one can vehemently disagree with specific policies of the Israeli government yet still consider oneself a Zionist.

Can you, a Jew, support BLM? The answer will depend on you and the context in which you encounter the question. You need to start with *which* BLM is being referenced. Once you have clarified *which* BLM, you can decide if *that* BLM represents something you believe will make the world a better place.

David Ben Moshe (born David Bonett) is a writer, inspirational speaker, and expert fitness coach whose life is a testament to the power of positive change. While serving a prison sentence for selling drugs and guns, he decided to build a better life once released. He became a successful personal trainer, eventually owning his own business, a fitness studio in Baltimore. Ben Moshe has a B.S. in Exercise Science, Magna Cum Laude, from Towson University. He is also pursuing a Master's degree in Journalism from NYU and writing a memoir chronicling his incredible journey. Ben Moshe studied Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, where he won a prestigious Social Justice Fellowship.

Ben Moshe lives in Be'er Sheva, Israel, with his wife and two children. He has been awaiting Israeli citizenship since being denied due to his previous incarceration.