

RESEARCH REPORT | DECEMBER 2022

# FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH:

LESSONS ON RACIAL EQUITY WORK  
FROM OUR JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE FIELD

**JEWISH  
SOCIAL  
JUSTICE**  
ROUNDTABLE

## INTRODUCTION

Racial equity work is a journey full of unexpected twists and turns that offer new insights, relationships, and communities. The Jewish Social Justice Roundtable made a commitment in 2017 to collectively embark on that journey—and we continue to learn together what that truly means.

With this report, we offer a window into trends and learnings around racial inclusion and equity work among Roundtable affiliates over the past five years.

In our unabashed moments of hope, we want this research to help organizational leaders recognize some successful approaches and real challenges facing the field that they can apply to their own organizations. We want our multiracial, multiethnic social justice field to remember it can draw on the wisdom of others, and to feel re-committed and re-energized in undertaking this holy, courageous journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was made possible by the insights and advice of many leaders in our field, without whom none of this would be possible. We are deeply appreciative of both Deitra Reiser, Ph.D., and Joelle Asaro Berman, the two researchers who conducted the interviews that are the foundation of this report.

We also are deeply grateful to the multiracial group of 20 staff members from 12 organizations and the three racial equity consultants who agreed to participate in this research and gave generously of their time for the interviews.

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.*

- ADRIENNE RICH

**We are grateful to the incredible leaders  
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and sparked our thinking:**

**April Baskin,**

former Racial Justice Director of the Roundtable,  
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and Evan Traylor

***This work cannot be done alone.  
We are grateful to each of you!***

## WHY DID THE ROUNDTABLE DO THIS RESEARCH?

The purpose of this report is to gather learnings from organizations that have engaged in internal racial equity work for a significant amount of time so they could be shared among the network and help guide the Roundtable's future work.

As the Roundtable enters its seventh year of centering racial equity and inclusion work, we wanted to collect insights from organizations about how this work is progressing. Since this research focused primarily on racial equity progress from an organizational perspective, interviews were conducted with executive team members (the majority of whom are white) as well as non-executive JOCSM/BIPOC staff.<sup>1</sup> We interviewed JOCSM/BIPOC staff because they experience organizational racial equity work differently and because the majority of them are not in executive-level positions at Roundtable affiliates.

It's important to note that for some JOCSM/BIPOC staff, this report may not provide any new information that they themselves haven't already experienced or are unaware of. There also are JOCSM/BIPOC staff who might find this report affirming because it reflects their experiences and perhaps combats a sense of isolation. And both may be true for some JOCSM/BIPOC staff.

We believe that this report offers insights, trends, and learnings about internal racial equity so that organizations improve their racial equity work and recommit to becoming more antiracist.

We hope that this report advances our network's collective understanding and sophistication in racial equity work to create the conditions for healthier and more vibrant multiracial workplaces.

## OUR APPROACH AND BASELINE ASSUMPTIONS

The Roundtable's approach to this research is built on fundamental principles about what it means to do internal organizational racial justice work, which are articulated in our Racial Justice Framework.<sup>2</sup> Our racial equity work is grounded in a both/and approach that consists of two strategies of equal importance: consistently calling attention to and increasing awareness of the ways white staff have power and investing continuously in JOCSM/BIPOC leadership.

We hope this report results in organizational leaders becoming more aware of the ways racial inequities and power imbalances show up in their organizations and re-commit to changing so that organizations become places where JOCSM/BIPOC have more access to opportunities, leadership, and power.

The Roundtable itself invests in JOCSM/BIPOC leadership through convening JOCSM/BIPOC staff virtually and in-person, and offering access to experienced JOC Mentors.

Organizations and leaders within the Roundtable network<sup>3</sup> have other, more particular reasons why racial equity work is relevant for them. The following are some of the reasons that apply to the Roundtable network as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Jews of Color, Sephardi, Mizrahi / Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

<sup>2</sup> The Roundtable's Pilot Racial Justice Framework, which includes our Ten Guiding Principles for Racial Justice, created by JSJR's previous Director of Racial Justice, April Baskin, in 2019. [www.jewishsocialjustice.org/framework](http://www.jewishsocialjustice.org/framework)

<sup>3</sup> A list of affiliates that make up the Roundtable's network are on our website. [www.jewishsocialjustice.org/affiliate-list](http://www.jewishsocialjustice.org/affiliate-list)

**The Roundtable believes that internal racial equity is a necessary part of Jewish social justice work because:**

1. All of our external work is impacted by racism and would be more successful if racism were dismantled. Achieving racial justice would contribute to all of our organizations' missions—whether it's addressing food insecurity, immigrant and refugee rights, building vibrant Jewish communities, civil and human rights, and more.
2. As individuals and as organizations, we understand the interconnections between racial justice and social justice. We believe that systemic and interpersonal racism are wrong and understand that part of working for justice is working for racial equity.
3. Having Jewish organizations where JOCSM/ BIPOC staff can work, lead, and thrive will make our organizations more inclusive and equitable for people with other marginalized identities.

**Racial equity is a practice and a lifelong journey.**

We understand racial equity work as an ongoing commitment, similar to how we approach Yom Kippur. Every year we acknowledge the ways we have done better as well as the harm we have caused others and pledge to improve our behaviors and actions in the coming year.

**Every level of an organization, including the board, must be committed to racial equity work for it to be successful and sustainable.** The progress of the Jewish social justice field's racial equity work depends on how much commitment to racial equity each staff member and board member cultivates and maintains. This commitment needs to be present throughout an entire organization to achieve sustainable progress. When an organization understands how each person contributes to the culture through practices, behaviors, and policies, it becomes clear that every person in that organization has a role in reflecting and committing to applying a racial equity lens into their work.

## STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

Before diving into the key takeaways, we want to highlight some of the successes and bright spots from our field's experiences. There are many existing strengths to build upon: the progress made towards racial diversity in staff and board teams, the reporting mechanism in place through the Roundtable for the Jewish social justice field, and several specific examples of equitable organizational practices. Of course, there is much more work to be done, and the bulk of this report is dedicated to that through our takeaways and recommended next steps. And, it's important to remember and highlight the progress we have achieved, regardless of the size of the larger effort.

**IT'S NOT UP TO YOU TO FINISH THE TASK, BUT NEITHER ARE YOU FREE TO DESIST FROM IT.**

**לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגָמוּר, וְלֹא אֶתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְהַבְטִיל מִמֶּנָּה**

**PIRKEI AVOT 2:16**

Our Jewish social justice field has become only slightly more racially diverse since 2018. While progress has been made, given that there are over 2,000 staff at our affiliates, the number of JOC staff at our organizations is still a drop in the bucket.

2018	2022
Few JSJR affiliate organizations were deeply engaged in racial equity and inclusion work and many were beginning	Some form of racial equity work is underway at 65 affiliate organizations, including all 34 Member affiliates
10 affiliates had 23 JOCSM/BIPOC staff	33 organizations have 79 JOCSM/BIPOC staff
Unknown number of multiracial boards	35 organizations have multiracial boards with 82 JOCSM/BIPOC board members

Another strength is that all 34 Roundtable Members have committed to racial equity and are annually reporting to the Roundtable about it—one mechanism for accountability. Each summer, JSJR affiliates share their key racial equity accomplishments for the past year and goals for the coming year. This commitment to internal racial equity work has been in place for Member organizations since 2019, and the network recently decided to expand it to include Partner organizations so that by 2023, all affiliates will make goals and be held accountable to them.

We are proud of a variety of actions our organizations are taking to advance racial equity, including:

- Funds exclusively available to JOCSM/BIPOC staff for professional development

- Funds and support for JOCSM to participate in JOC leadership development cohorts
- Hiring JOCSM/BIPOC staff
- Equity funds for JOCSM/BIPOC staff to help cover personal needs during COVID in order to address the inequitable economic impact of COVID on staff of color
- Building multiracial boards so that JOCSM/BIPOC are participating in decision-making processes, thus shifting power structures

As we delve further into the learnings, we draw strength from these indicators of progress from our Jewish social justice field.

## FIVE HIGH-LEVEL TAKEAWAYS

### TAKEAWAY #1

#### **The journey toward internal racial equity is nonlinear and therefore requires a long-term commitment.**

There's no official playbook nor one right way to do this work; what is important is that an organization stays committed to learning and growing because real racial equity change requires many iterations. Interviewees pointed out that they expected their racial equity work would be nonlinear and understood they would inevitably experience setbacks to the progress they had made. In fact, traveling a path that isn't clear or isn't leading straight ahead can be a sign of growth.

*"This is really, really hard and long-term work and people don't know what the other side looks or feels like, or haven't been in spaces with other people who are grappling with these [issues] in a real way. All this means initial consent is insufficient, and what might be needed is over and over reconsenting, reaffirming why this work is important and essential."* - **CEO OF A ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE**

However, what each organization that had made progress had in common was determination and a supportive external community in which to continue pursuing and centering racial equity.

*"Research shows that certain kinds of change happen in about 10-year cycles. It means that people [in racial equity work] in the short term often can't look for the change itself but instead are looking for indicators or clues that things are starting to change. It's similar to cooking a pancake: we look for the bubbles to indicate the other side of the pancake is ready."* - **CONSULTANT TO ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATES**

### TAKEAWAY #2

#### **Work through emotions, rather than ignoring them.**

When something feels hard or impossible, it can be tempting to check out or quit. Working towards

racial equity often activates challenging emotions such as shame, shock, regret, embarrassment, and disappointment.

These emotions can serve a purpose. For example: *"Shame can cause people in power to tighten and constrict and pull back resources. [Instead,] I would offer optimal tension. Too much agitation in the system triggers a freeze of shame. But if there is not enough tension in the system, things don't change. So where is the point of optimal tension? At what point does agitation cause things to move but does not trigger a freeze?"* - **CONSULTANT TO ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATES**

Staff across racial identities in leadership positions shared that despite best-laid plans to ensure racial equity, they made mistakes, engaged in racism, and harmed JOCSM/BIPOC staff. They each acknowledged initially experiencing shock and shame at realizing racism had happened despite their best efforts to curtail it. Two interviewees described their understanding—gained through experience—of how shame can keep them frozen and stall progress. Once they saw this pattern, they each made conscious efforts to get the emotional support they needed to more quickly and authentically make amends for the racist harm that was caused.

They successfully, if messily, prioritized JOCSM/BIPOC staff and racial equity progress above their own reactive emotions. Had these two leaders stayed frozen for too long because of shame, accountability to the impacted individual might not have happened and organizational progress might not have been made.

Emotions inevitably will arise when engaging in racial equity work. Leaders and organizations can acknowledge this pattern in advance and create models and resources for moving through emotions so they don't hinder progress towards greater internal racial equity. Instead of being stymied by the emotions, get curious. Ask questions. Stay engaged. The uncomfortable feelings are temporary and will dissipate as leaders and staff members learn more and strengthen their skills.

### TAKEAWAY #3

**Racial equity work requires dedicated time and resources.** It should be an organizational priority alongside other essential work such as fundraising, communications, and programming. One key learning from the field is the importance of having a senior staff person leading the racial equity work. Having a staff person with the positional power and authority, who also has adequate resources, is key for an organization to successfully implement change.

*"[If I am] a staff person at the c-suite level, I can get stuff done. I have the authority to delegate tasks to my supervisees and beyond. ... I've worked with other organizations where the staff person dedicated to racial equity was about four or five levels down from the CEO and did not have the power and authority to implement racial equity work. This just caused frustration."* - CONSULTANT TO ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATES

As with any large-scale change, racial equity can be approached as a series of goals because achieving it is a process.

*"It's also true that organizations cannot tackle all internal racial equity work at once, especially in the early stages of their journeys. To stay the course, they must focus efforts in areas they find most pressing, creating more capacity for the work as they go."* - CEO OF A ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE

### TAKEAWAY #4

**Alignment between the board and staff is important.** Organizations reported that one key to success was having executive leadership who consistently worked with the board to ensure their support—or at a minimum, their understanding. However, in one interview, a consultant shared their goal working with organizations *"is not full alignment between staff and board, but more not being so dramatically separate on issues of racial equity."*

- CONSULTANT TO ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE

Interviewees shared a few indicators of successful alignment, such as board approval of a budget that reflects the commitment to racial equity.

Conversely, an interviewee shared the negative impact on their racial equity work when there was either misalignment among board members or between the board and the organization's staff.

*"I wish my organization could have known how hard it was going to be to get some board members to support racial equity work. If some board members are responsible for raising funds to do racial equity work, and find themselves questioning why [we are doing] racial equity work, it's not a good place to move work forward."* - JOCSM/BIPOC STAFF MEMBER OF A ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE

### TAKEAWAY #5

**Fighting for social justice externally while avoiding racism internally can appear hypocritical.** Throughout these interviews, the theme of "getting one's house in order first" resonated with staff across organizations. Both JOCSM/BIPOC and white staff named the tension of organizations centering internal racial equity work while simultaneously engaging in external advocacy or organizing around racial justice efforts. The tension here for staff was organizational leadership denying or resisting confronting internal racist policies and practices in order to prevent the risk of appearing hypocritical or inauthentic to external partners and the field. Even organizations with multiracial teams or that participate in multiethnic, multiracial coalitions faced moments of reckoning with the people who they harmed through racist actions, both internally and externally.

## THE IMPACT ON, AND EXPERIENCE OF, JOCSM/BIPOC STAFF

*“Reverse-engineering’ [becoming antiracist in culture, practice and policies] is really hard and almost impossible to do without causing harm on BIPOC.”*

- CEO OF A ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE

The interviews illustrated three key trends about the experiences of JOCSM/BIPOC staff, all of whom were either leading or working at an organization while it was undertaking racial equity work.

### IMPACT #1

**There is an extra burden on and harm done to JOCSM/BIPOC staff members.** When organizations prioritize racial equity, those efforts can sometimes result in centering the voices and leadership of JOCSM/BIPOC staff. However, these efforts can also put these individuals at risk for harm during an unpredictable and complex racial equity process. This harm is often experienced at the cognitive and emotional levels when JOCSM/BIPOC staff have to identify racist behaviors and practices, whether as part of their role or not, to keep organizations accountable.

*“As People of Color, to speak up about things that are going wrong, it’s a very thin line between being an advocate and being seen as the angry Black person in the room and so constantly finding that fine line [of] how to move things forward without turning people off—has been one of the biggest things I’ve had to learn to do.”*

- JOCSM/BIPOC STAFF MEMBER OF A ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE

*“Keep your job and always stay sane—I wish I had known more how heavy this burden would be.”*

- JOCSM/BIPOC STAFF MEMBER OF A ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE

### IMPACT #2

**A lack of understanding of tokenization by organizational leadership is a stumbling block.** When organizations were striving to center the voices and experiences of JOCSM/BIPOC, many of the JOCSM/BIPOC staff felt tokenized by their organization and its leadership. One JOCSM/BIPOC staff member shared how after the murder of George Floyd, there was (and continues to be) a culture of urgency and pressure that they be the spokesperson for all matters related to racial equity, which still tokenizes them. They shared how overwhelming the work is, how they do not have a healthy work/life balance as a result of this urgency, and how emotionally hard it is for them to be the only JOCSM/BIPOC staff person who speaks to racial equity issues.

Feelings of tokenization also are caused by the actual structure and staffing of some organizations. A number of JOCSM/BIPOC staff shared their experiences of not having the authority, power, or resources to do their jobs successfully, which makes them question whether the organization is authentic when hiring JOCSM/BIPOC staff or whether it is done for the sake of being able to check boxes. Even within the constraints of their organizations, JOCSM/BIPOC staff feel they are not being as well resourced and supported as their white colleagues.

### IMPACT #3

**There is a burden on JOCSM/BIPOC to recruit and retain JOCSM/BIPOC for organizational opportunities.** A recurring theme throughout the interviews was how to recruit and retain JOCSM/BIPOC for staff, programs and fellowships, and board positions. JOCSM/BIPOC shared there are constant requests for them to use their personal and professional relationships for recruitment while white organizational leaders ignore the real issue: not having their own relationships with JOCSM/BIPOC folks. This places the burden and full responsibility on JOCSM/BIPOC. One interviewee noted that JOCSM/



BIPOC staff stay for much less time than white staff and hold more entry level positions in their organization.

As more organizations strive to have JOCSM/BIPOC as board members, some boards removed their give/get policy after reflecting on how classism and racism have been part of board membership structures. One interviewee noted that organizations should be asking themselves, “Why do we want POC on our board? Is it to get their money or can they contribute knowledge to our work?” - JOCSM/BIPOC STAFF OF A ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE

## ACTIONS TOWARDS RACIAL EQUITY

This section is dedicated to actions that organizations can take towards equity, based on the themes from the research and the Roundtable’s approach. It is by no means exhaustive.

### ACTION #1

**Invest in and support JOCSM/BIPOC staff.** Given what this report reveals about the impacts on JOCSM/BIPOC staff, we strongly recommend organizations engaged in racial equity take steps to support People of Color. There are a variety of ways to do this, including:

**1. Provide and/or finance professional development opportunities.** Organizations can and should pay for leadership or skill-building programs of each staff member’s choosing, which can include the Roundtable’s programs (JOCSM/BIPOC gatherings and the JOC mentor program). Organizations should honor the time needed to participate in these offerings by not scheduling other events during that time or expecting JOCSM/BIPOC to choose between competing events.

**2. Shift organizational power.** Shifting organizational power means creating and implementing structures for JOCSM/BIPOC staff (who so choose) to meaningfully

participate in decision-making around racial equity work. Providing the opportunity for access to real organizational power is key.

**3. Stay engaged even when harm has been done.** It can be tempting to disengage or shut down when emotions are high or when harm has been caused. The learnings in this report demonstrate that progress happens when staff stay engaged with each other and work through challenging emotions and situations. Do not assume that by disengaging, less harm will be created. In fact, the learnings demonstrate that progress was made when staff (both white and People of Color) stayed engaged throughout the entire process of accountability and repair.

**4. Recognize that non-Jewish BIPOC staff members face additional challenges.** We know that many staff in the Jewish social justice field are non-Jewish BIPOC. We encourage organizations to continue creating organizational cultures of inclusion in which non-Jewish BIPOC staff feel they belong and are not at a professional disadvantage due to their lack of knowledge or experience with Judaism.

### ACTION #2

**Use this report as an opportunity to re-engage and re-energize.** We invite organizations to make time to reflect on this report as a staff and as individuals. What areas resonate? Were there any findings that align with the challenges you are facing? In what ways can organizations invite conversations as a staff on these issues? Might any of these learnings spark ideas for interventions in your own organizations?

Allow this report to serve as a reminder of potential consequences for stalling or avoiding these issues. As social justice organizations, we are held to higher expectations around fighting systemic racism, both internally and externally.

### ACTION #3

**Model and emphasize a committed stance of learning and curiosity as much as possible.** Unlearning racism is possible when we adopt a mindset of consistent openness and curiosity. We encourage each individual to model this approach as part of vibrant, healthy organizational culture.

### ACTION #4

**Dedicate resources to racial equity work.** Examples include:

- Creating task forces or committees composed of staff representing different identities, departments, roles, and levels of authority, which are responsible for moving the work forward
- Having a line in the organizational budget explicitly for racial equity work
- Financially compensating JOCSM/BIPOC staff (and consultants) for their time when they engage in the organization's racial equity work in any way that is outside their job descriptions

### ACTION #5

**Consistently engage and re-engage the board on racial equity work.** There are a number of ways to achieve better alignment between boards (both decision-making and advisory) and staff, and this is ongoing work that looks different in each organization depending on size, complexity, and resources. Each organization should decide the ongoing process that fits it. Possibilities include:

- Continue to recruit, support, and retain Jews of Color on the board
- Consider recruiting and retaining non-Jewish BIPOC board members who have a relevant relationship with the organization, e.g., coalition or community partners
- Rethink board give/get obligations in order to remove financial barriers
- Consider board membership criteria and perhaps, processes for removal, that include expectations for racial equity analysis and experience

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this report is to summarize learnings from organizations that have been engaged in internal racial equity work so they could be shared among the Roundtable network. Our hope is that by compiling and sharing takeaways, everyone who reads this takes the opportunity to reflect on areas of individual and organizational growth and recommit to racial equity. This report also will help guide the Roundtable's future work.

Many of the learnings and takeaways point to an overarching need for structures of accountability so that the work of racial equity doesn't fall on the shoulders of individuals but is held in place by systems and structures. It is unsustainable and unfair to expect individual JOCSM/BIPOC staff members to point out moments of racism or initiate and implement more racially equitable policies, procedures, and budgets. The Roundtable looks forward to exploring accountability models that center transformative justice practices, which we see as a next significant phase of work.

In closing, may this report serve as a reminder to us all that,

***...the natural condition of life in the United States, in a society defined by white supremacy, the natural condition will be racism. So the one thing to say—when you are not consistently putting attention and focus on it, racism will happen. If you're not moving forward, you're moving backwards.***

- JOCSM/BIPOC STAFF MEMBER OF A ROUNDTABLE AFFILIATE

May we go from strength to strength, from learning to learning, so that our Jewish organizations become more equitable and liberated places of work.

**חַזַּק חַזַּק וְנִתְחַזֵּק**

**חַזַּק חַזַּק וְנִתְחַזֵּק**

*Chazak, Chazak, V'nitchazek*

From Strength to Strength. May We Be Strengthened.

## METHODOLOGY

The Roundtable invited organizations to participate in this research using two key criteria: organizations that had at least two years of experience with internal racial equity work and had multiracial staff teams. We also aimed for diversity in organizational size, scope (national vs local), and approach.

Deitra Reiser, Ph.D., and Joelle Asaro Berman conducted one-on-one interviews in summer and fall 2021 with a multiracial group of 20 staff members from 12 organizations, as well as with three racial equity consultants who have worked with multiple Roundtable affiliates. The staff members worked at the following organizations: Avodah, Bend the Arc, Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, Jews United for Justice, JOIN for Justice, Keshet, National Council of Jewish Women, Reconstructing Judaism, Repair the World, and T'ruah.

Deitra and Joelle asked the same set of questions to each participant during an hour-long recorded Zoom call. Deitra spoke with the staff of color and Joelle spoke with the white staff.