

Understanding Antisemitism and Racism – Kohenet Shoshana A Brown, LMSW & Autumn Leonard
Episode 60
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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

In this episode, I talk with Shoshana Brown and Autumn Leonard of the Black Jewish Liberation Collective and Jews for Economic & Racial Justice, based in New York City. We discuss what antisemitism is, ways it functions, and how antisemitism and racism are features of white supremacy. Shoshana and Autumn talk about their work to provide a communal space for Black Jews and how they organize to disrupt antisemitism and racism. We get into a lot in this interview but there is so much more on this topic that needs to be talked about. I know that even though I'm Jewish, I could do a better job talking and teaching about antisemitism, and how it works to divide us. It can be frustrating to bring it up when so many people are not taught the origins of antisemitism and how it operates. At the same time, those of you who follow the podcast know that we can't avoid these hard topics, and like Shoshana, Autumn, and I talk about, change only comes when we address antisemitism and racism and work to build community. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UH has a phenomenal social work program that offers face-to-face master's and doctorate degrees as well as an online and hybrid MSW. They offer one of the country's only political social work programs and an abolitionist focused learning opportunity. Located in the heart of Houston, the program is guided by their bold vision to achieve racial, social, economic, and political justice, local to global. In the classroom and through research, they are committed to challenging systems and reimagining ways to achieve justice and liberation. Go to www.uh.edu/socialwork to learn more. And now, the interview.

Hey, Shoshana and Autumn, thank you so much for coming on the podcast. I'm really excited to have this conversation and it's been a long time coming as far as Doin' The Work the podcast goes. I've wanted to do an episode about antisemitism. I did one with Eric Ward years ago on Fighting White Nationalism and it wasn't explicitly about antisemitism. And I love his stuff and I love what he's been talking about lately.

And for this episode when I've... thinking about doing one on antisemitism, I just wanted to be really mindful and conscious, like I am with all my shows, but there's just, often when we have Jews talking about antisemitism, it's White, Ashkenazi Jews like me talking about it. And anti-Black racism doesn't then get addressed and we know that exists within the larger Jewish community. And so that's something I wanted to be really mindful of. So I'm so grateful that you both are on here and we're going to have this conversation. So just with all that said, just to start out, maybe you both could introduce yourself and share a little about how you identify.

Autumn Leonard:

Hi, I'm Autumn. I am a mother of two. I am Black and Jewish. I'm married to a Jewish dude raising two Jewish kids, one more successfully than the other one. I am the former co-chair of the race working group at my synagogue, Kolot Chayeinu. I'm member of the Jew of Color cohort at Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, and also on the wisdom crew at the Black Jewish Liberation Collective with Shoshana.

Shoshana Brown:

Autumn is amazing. I just have to say that out loud, but my name is Shoshana, I use she/they pronouns. And I am a Black Jewish femme living in New York City. I'm born and raised in New York City for three generations strong. So I am here even though this city is very, very different than I grew up in. That aside, I'm a social worker, trained as an organizer and currently working full-time as a school social worker and alongside with Autumn in leadership at the Black Jewish Liberation Collective, as well as a member of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice Radical Social Work Group. And overall just a love of restorative justice and fighting anti-Black racism all over the place.

Shimon Cohen:

I love it. And the work y'all are doing, just super excited to talk more about it. So to start out, I was just thinking we could talk about how you or how we define antisemitism. So if you have some sort of, I don't know, it doesn't need to be some super specific definition, but like how do you explain antisemitism to people?

Autumn Leonard:

When I think about antisemitism, I focus on who benefits. So this is a system that was created in Europe, couple hundred years ago as Jews were fleeing violence in Western Asia, sometimes called the Middle East. And as they were fleeing into Europe, European people who were holding wealth there, wealthy landowners, feudal lords, whatever you want to call it, made rules. They said you Jews don't get to own land. There are only very specific things that you can do. And one of those was being tax collectors. So then the Jews become the face of taxation, which everybody loves being taxed. You can see that's still in this country. And so then when folks are like, well my taxes are too high, they're directing that anger at Jews instead of the people. Jews aren't making the rules, they don't want to be the tax collectors and they don't get to decide how much people are taxed for.

They are just the face of a system. And so that system keeps the Jews separate from the poor White folks in Europe, I guess at that point they were just called Europeans. They weren't even called White folks, from the poor Europeans. And so they become separate, so the Jews aren't benefiting, and poor Europeans aren't benefiting, but someone is benefiting from that system. And meanwhile directing the anger of people who might be experiencing unfair taxation towards Jews. And so things like that are the beginning of antisemitism as I understand it. I'm not a historian, but I like to read. And then that system gets imported over here to the U.S. where it gets mapped onto racism, which is also a system that was created to keep poor White folks in line. And I like to point out that it's poor White folks more than it is Black folks, even though Black folks, Black bodies are disproportionately endangered and hurt by racism.

There's only still in this day and age 12 percent of the population is Black folks. And back then it was similar, actually a pretty small percentage of the overall population. And so what they're really seeking to control is not Black people, but poor White people. And they're doing that by saying, "Dude, you do not want to end up like those people over there. So unless you separate yourself Black and White, you will end up being dehumanized in the same way that Black folks were dehumanized in this country as enslaved people." So then when Jews come over here around the turn of the century... my grandfather just passed away. He would've been 99 this month. So when Jews first come over here, they are considered not to be White.

And they immediately get involved in social change. They do amazing union organizing. They're part of a lot of the stuff that's baked into New York City in terms of clothing manufacturing. And Jews are a part of fighting for things like the five-day work week. And then what happens is somebody then brings antisemitism as a great system of control and they're like, "Hey Black folks, when you are victims of

things like redlining and real estate where we are refusing to let you buy houses outside of certain zones, the real perpetrators of that are Jews." And so the Jews don't benefit from this. Black folks definitely don't benefit from this, but somebody does benefit when these groups that have more in common with each other don't get along. And so I really always look at these systems, whether it's racism or antisemitism, and I ask myself, "Well, this system didn't just happen. Somebody worked to make a system like this work, and who benefits from it?"

And so when you see Black folks like my hairdresser being upset at a Frum man because he outbids her for a building here in Brooklyn and she's like, "Hey, I'm trying to amass some generational wealth to pass on to my family. You already have three buildings, could you give me this one? Our bids aren't that different. Could you just see me as a person?" And he is like, "No, I don't see you. You are not part of my people." So then she is like, "All Jews are X", but actually the Frum dudes in Williamsburg and Brooklyn are not the huge wealthy real estate tycoons in this city. There is someone else who is benefiting. And that's like how I see antisemitism and how it gets mapped into our country today. And historically someone is benefiting from it and it really is not the Black folks.

Shoshana Brown:

And I would add to that by sharing that I think this happens in the areas not only of real estate, where we see that's true for real estate, but we also see that in the area of jewelry. And there's a huge history around how Jewish people got into the jewelry business that actually has to do with settling South Africa and the diamond in the diamond industry in South Africa. And then you can also see that in Hollywood where just last week my coworker was like, "Yeah, but all Jews, they own Hollywood", and I'm like, "Actually..." right.

And so we see these myth continue to perpetuate, and I think it's important as we uncover our definition or understanding of antisemitism, that we look at the ways in which this is systemic and institutional and not just about the one-to-one, one person hating a Jew, targeting or blaming a Jew for one thing, but look at the pattern over centuries of targeting and blaming Jews and confusing non-Jewish people about who actually is in power and who actually has power and how easy that has become now that a lot of Ashkenazi White Jews have assimilated into White American culture and assimilated and accepted White privilege and benefit from White privilege.

And find that there are so many, I mean we can talk forever about all of the advantages that one receives from white privilege that would make it sexy to be like, "Well, yeah. Sure. If I'm going to get this privilege. All right." And not really having the consciousness of what that then means and what the detriments of accepting and moving with white privilege has, both on the broader Jewish community overall and also on our American society, our society as a whole. So in short, I would just add that I think an easy way to understand antisemitism is that it is a wedge and a way that often myths are created to blame Jews for things that are not necessarily to the benefit of Jews who people believe it is. So they become the wedge in between many other oppression issues.

Shimon Cohen:

Absolutely. This buffer group, almost like the role of a managerial class in a way. I'm not saying it's all like that, but it's one comparison. I learned something in the last year about antisemitism that I never knew before. And I was reading this book, *Racism Not Race, Answers to Frequently Asked Questions* by Joseph Graves and Alan Goodman, and this question, is antisemitism a form of racism? And they say yes, and that it's a unique form, but they talk about the word antisemitism being coined in 1879 by a German political agitator because in German, the term was *Judenhass*, which means Jew-hatred. And it was like

a freely used term, so people weren't trying to hide it. And it makes me really wonder if antisemitism never became a term and people were actually saying this is Jew-hatred, how this would be different. Because I think just even the term itself is confusing for people. And that's what the goal was to do back then was it turned Jews into this Semitic people. It made this race, which for them, they already had a scientific hierarchy of race that they were using. So for them, it was fine to do that for these Aryans that were doing this because they could put Semitic people at the bottom and Aryans on top. But it's a strange term and we see this come up with some of the stuff that's been in the news recently about Kanye and Kyrie and we'll get into a little more about that later, but them saying, "How can we be antisemitic if we're Semitic too," type of stuff. And it just makes me wonder, and there's no going back at this point. The term antisemitism is not going away. But it does make me wonder. In the book, they're like, "We should all really just say Jew-hatred because that's what it is."

Autumn Leonard:

That's so interesting. I'm going to think about that. That's a hundred percent what it is. But also, I think of it a little bit like the same oppression olympics sometimes that people like to play where they're like, I was thinking about this on a call the other night where a Black person, looking at one of those power privilege wheels and was like, "Why does my citizenship convey power and privilege, because I'm a stolen person on stolen lands. So my ancestors didn't choose to be here, so why does citizenship confer power on me?" And I was like, "Yo, I get that. I really get that. And also during the pandemic when we were getting those pandemic paychecks, undocumented folks couldn't access it. And that's your privilege," and that person was like, "Dope. I see that. I can see that."

So it's like sometimes you just have to put it in terms that make sense, right? Because you're like, yeah, you are disproportionately targeted by the police, yeah, your kids get put into jail and suspended at all these extras. So what benefit does citizenship confer on your body and your family's body? But then you're like, but actually you got stimulus paychecks and there are millions of people in this country who couldn't access it because they don't have papers and they still pay taxes. That's the thing that always blows my mind. Undocumented folks pay taxes and then we're like, okay, here's the benefits of citizenship and they don't get it.

And I'm like, but they paid in. They don't get social security, but they are still paying for social security. That sucks. Anyway, that's a digression. But that's like when you're talking about whether or not we call it Jew-hatred and if that would make a difference, I'm like, I think you really have to put it in terms that make sense to the people you're talking to. You can maybe tell from how I like to tell stories, I don't always pull out a bunch of academic facts and throw them at people because I don't think that's how we build trust and understanding. That's just like I'm going to bludgeon you with my knowledge.

Shoshana Brown:

Well, one thing that I want to bring up is also that the antisemitism piece is I don't want us to get caught up or confused about the origins of the word antisemitism because actually I think that that's a different conversation to have about, well it's antisemitism but it's not related to all Semitic people and things like that. And even that conversation serves the purpose of antisemitism to confuse everybody about what is this thing that we're talking about? And part of what makes it confusing and as we talk about how it's related to racism and racial issues here in the U.S. is that the antisemitism often appears as cyclical rather than hierarchical. So whereas most oppression are about, there's a group of people on the bottom and there's a group of people on the top, there's the people who have privilege and then the people who are oppressed.

And if you go down the line and looking at racism, sexism, ageism, adultism, ableism, et cetera, you'll see that there's very binary categories of do you receive privilege in this area or are you oppressed by this issue? Whereas I think with antisemitism, we don't see it operate specifically as always either privileged or oppression, but rather cyclically in the context of what benefits Christian white supremacists. If in the moment blaming something and making Jews the bad guy actually helps me get away with theft as we're seeing with the Trump Real Estate Corporation, then yeah, let's blame the Jews.

But if making the Jews part of accepting them into whiteness and offering a certain community of Jews white privilege, benefits us in the context of a war that we want to fight, then we will offer them white privilege. And so you see this thing, this push and pull, and you see Jews, often White Jews specifically often, and Jews in general, being ping-ponged between actually being Jewish is good and I have this privilege or access and then actually being Jewish is bad. I want nothing to do with it. I want to hide it. I don't want anybody to know about it. And we see that cycle happening over and over, whether it's in the context of the U.S. or in Germany or in Europe or in other places, that is actually the core of how antisemitism operates is that it's useful when it's useful. And so instead of just being stiff and rigid about how we understand antisemitism, we actually have to look at the cyclical paths that are happening.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, that makes sense. I think it is a very confusing process for people because there's things about being Jewish that... 2% of the population or whatever. So there's going to be things where if you're Jewish, you're in the minority and you've got different cultural ways of doing things and things like that come up. But then there's-

Shoshana Brown:

Unless you live in New York City and then you think it's normal.

Shimon Cohen:

No, I know. And that's just a whole other situation.

Shoshana Brown:

And they're like, "Wait, not everybody eats bagels? That's not a normal thing?"

Shimon Cohen:

Well, here in Miami, even on the High Holy Days, they call it teacher work days here, but for me growing up in Maine, we always got pulled out of school on those days and it was a huge issue with tests and homework. And the moms would always go and try to explain, please don't give tests on these days. So those were things about being this religious and cultural minority. It wasn't necessarily... So those are some structural things and things that are going to happen when you're a group like that. But that's different also, even though maybe there's a piece of it, of being afraid of getting rounded up again and what could happen, which I think is a trauma that affect... I don't speak for all Jews, but everyone that I've ever talked to in my family history, it's clearly passed down of, "This could happen again." And we hear it all the time. And I think it's a real fear, which is that of antisemitism, the cyclical nature of are we ever really safe anywhere?

Shoshana Brown:

Yeah. Well, let's get real. Every Jewish holiday is like, "They tried to kill us and we lived, haha." We live in the side of... Beyond the Holocaust, a lot of our religious practices, the prayers that we say every Shabbos, et cetera, are about being survivors and always remembering that we're survivors. And so yet that is not an extension or an exaggeration or outlandish to say that there is communal trauma and generational trauma around being threatened and around our safety and various ways in which our community has responded. And I think we're at a point right now where we need to be in healing and recognize that those trauma responses are no longer serving the fullness of our community. Those trauma responses to be scared, to hunker down, to close up, to be exclusionary, have worked. They have worked for people.

Those are ways that our people have survived and they might not be working for us right now today in the face of the current threats that we have today with neo-Nazis, with what just happened in the German government, 25 people arrested for attempting a coup in the German government, including judges and police, et cetera. We have to reckon with the fact that the white supremacy threat and the threat of Nazis and the rise in antisemitism is not some made up thing in our mind that we're just navigating trauma and we all just need to go to an individual therapist. First of all, that response itself is white supremacy and I can do a whole nother podcast-

Autumn Leonard:

That the problem is individual.

Shoshana Brown:

What'd you say?

Autumn Leonard:

That the problem is individual as opposed to systemic. If I go to therapy, I'm going to fix it. That's not true. It's a systemic problem.

Shoshana Brown:

We can do a whole nother podcast about that. About mental health and white supremacy. But beyond that, I think we have to recognize that our fear is real and that the traditional ways that we have been navigating that fear and that we have been surviving, are not actually serving the majority of people. They're serving a few minority of people and there's a large portion of people that get left out and that get put in harm's way when we rely on our old trauma responses. And so that's the call right now is to be in the healing and to open up and to say, "What has been the trauma response of my family, of my generations, of my community, and what are better ways that I can move and shift and heal and open up?" And what Autumn and I have been doing and working through is safety and solidarity. When we open up to realize who actually is benefiting and who actually we can ally ourself with, who is also oppressed by the state system, we actually have better chances of surviving and actually thriving.

Autumn Leonard:

And I'm going to go even deeper in terms of who benefits where you were like, the keep it real. So you were saying Shimon, that Jews are not a monolith, you don't speak for all Jews. I don't speak for all Jews. I speak for my very particular position. But when we have this hunker down as our first response, we're not actually being in choice about our responses. We're acting out of instinct, but we're not, actually...

So when we're not acting out of choice, then we don't actually know, "Have I picked the choice that best serves me?" So I'm going to say there are some poor, working class Jews still in this country and they are very clear, some of the stuff that serves Jews who have climbed the social economic ladder doesn't serve all Jews.

Shimon Cohen:

Mmhmm.

Autumn Leonard:

I'm just going to be straight. There is a class distinction and there always has been, in terms of the Jews who immigrated to this country, there was definitely a fight about who gets to define what it means to be Jewish.

And in some ways, I think when Jews immigrated here, Jew became this catchall that it was like, okay, so you're not an Eastern European factory worker Jew, you might be a wealthy German Jew. And that these differences then all get baked into this one Jewish identity as a result of the Holocaust. But previous to that, there was definitely fights about who gets to define Judaism. And in this country where things are so binary, Black, White, and so then the things that Black folks struggle to retain, I don't know about you Sho, but I cannot name where my people came from. But if you sit in a room with Jews, the story of how we survived and how we traveled is one of the main ways you're like, "Oh, I'm part of the Ukrainian diaspora that then landed here," and then it became the Chicago diaspora or the Philly diaspora, the Pittsburgh diaspora and all of those things. So then when you come back to the ways in which race operates and antisemitism operates, antisemitism is used to get all Jews to react as Jews, whether or not that's in their social economic interest.

Shimon Cohen:

The class discussion, that analysis always needs to be part of this, which is part of the trope. And then it invisibilizes and pushes down more on working class and poor Jews, like "Wait, working class and poor Jews even exist?" Some people would be shocked to know that because that's so not the stereotype.

Autumn Leonard:

No.

Shimon Cohen:

And the history, like you said, of all the organizing and labor movement, I mean Emma Goldman, we could go through so many people. So shifting to the work you all are doing, Shoshana, because you started talking about that with the healing. What work are you doing on racial justice and antisemitism, and how do you incorporate that together? Or is there any separation? And... anyway, with that, is it always just together?

Shoshana Brown:

For me, they come hand in hand because of who I am and when I walk into the room, that is just what the conversation is. I'm in a place where I am able to navigate that and embrace that and use that as a tool for change. But that is often the case when any Black Jew walks into a room that people will begin to have conversations about that person and qualify what their Jewishness or qualify their Blackness, et cetera. And so really what this is about is exploring, putting out there that Black Jews do exist, that

we've been here, we are not new, we've been here for generations. And, in fact, that we have an important voice and an important perspective to share on social justice and particularly to move us towards liberation for Black people because we know that liberation for Black people will mean liberation for everyone. When those of us who are most oppressed get free, we are all then free, if we can solve the issue for the folks who are most impacted.

And so that is the work of the Black Jewish Liberation Collective, is elevating the voice of Black Jews across the country to showcase, to highlight, and to ensure that they have... that Black Jews across the country who are doing work towards Black liberation and against white supremacy, antisemitism, white nationalism are supported. And we have members across the country, from LA to the Bay, Texas, Atlanta, the Midwest, New York, Philadelphia, all up and down where we have members and leaders in most of the major cities in this country. And our work is to organize and to uplift the particular intersection that we're in. Because as antisemitism is cyclical, what I noticed in my own organizing and Autumn and many others have noticed, which is why we came together to form this collective, is that not only is antisemitism cyclical, but the way antisemitism gets used as a wedge issue to destroy the movement for Black liberation is actually cyclical as well.

The things that happen are not new. And so anytime the movement for Black liberation, in any decade that you look at, picks up steam, you'll find shortly after, there is a drop-off. And oftentimes I have found that drop-off to have to do with antisemitism and how White Jews get triggered inside of their commitment to racial justice and allyship. They get triggered around their own protection and their own safety. So much so that they use those trauma responses, close up, back away and get in fear when faced with real threats instead of digging deeper into the solidarity and trusting and in that White Jews have been allies for Black folks, that Black folks will also step up into the same and so that there is connection and trust. And so our work is that we have deep relationships in all these communities because we are part of all these communities.

And when White Jews and Black folks come into that conflict because of white supremacy and because of the sewing of distrust, we are here to offer our perspective as people who live at that particular intersection. And so beyond the organizing that we do to develop our political analysis, the support work that we do to just be in community, build community, build culture, thrive, live into our liberation, besides just saying we're fighting for liberation, we are off of living and thriving into liberation. So we want to be not only that liberation is the goal, but as part of our journey, as part of our work as a community, to be consistently inside of a liberatory practice. And I would say that that work could, with Autumn and I specifically, spills over and is inspired by and intermingles with the work of JFREJ also, which is the Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. And I don't know if Autumn wants to say more.

Autumn Leonard:

Yeah, I think the theme you might notice in terms of what we see, is that there is a connection between using Jews as a way to destroy liberation movements because the Jews are part of those liberation movements when they're in choice. Because when they're in choice, they recognize, "Actually I benefit from being part of a liberation movement." And then someone comes out and says, "Well, so and so is antisemitic," and then the Jews are like, "Peace, I'm out, yo. I'm having nothing to do with y'all. Y'all have come for me. Done." And then it's like, "Did they come for you? Who came for you? How did they come for you?"

So I'm going to just talk about Kanye for a second. Maybe you were saving that for later, but I want to bring it up. So here's someone, and I think of this a lot. I was talking to a friend of ours who's also in the BJLC who was talking about how Tucker Carlson, who's got the biggest microphone in the country, the most people watch Tucker Carlson, devoted a full hour of his show just to Kanye talking ish about Jews.

So I'm like, he wasn't just like here's this random celebrity dude. So he stirs up the Black folks and he stirs up the Jewish folks. Now, if you know anything about Tucker Carlson and Fox News, you know that they are not about liberation.

Shoshana Brown:

Or actual news.

Autumn Leonard:

That's true too. And so I was then watching this Between the Scenes, Trevor Noah, where someone was like, why are you beefing with Kanye? And Trevor was like, "Yo, I just want to be real. Kanye has bipolar disorder. My grandfather had bipolar disorder. And there were times when my grandfather, we all would just be like, wow, he's not really in the same reality as the rest of us right now. And I'm just like, how gross would it be if then someone had put a mic in front of my grandfather on those days and put it out into the world to be like this, not only does this represent my grandfather's use, but this represents all South Africans views."

And so he's like, "I'm not beefing with Kanye. I am literally out here being like, are you okay? And why is it okay for us as a society to put a microphone in front of your mouth right now when you may not be in your most stable connected frame of mind and then say, this is how all Black people think." That is divisive and it's gross. It's just gross. So when you think about Tucker Carlson interviewing Kanye about antisemitism for an hour, you're like, who benefits from that? Cause it's not Kanye, it's not Black people and it's not Jews, but it's definitely Fox News and it's definitely the people that Rupert Murdoch represents. And so it's definitely boosting Tucker Carlson's message. So I'm like, how is this message coming out? Who is holding the mic for this message? Who is amplifying this message? Because that tells me just as much about the message as whatever is in the message itself.

And nobody is asking Kanye like, "Whoa, are you okay right now? What does it feel like for all of us to be asking you questions in the space in which you're at? What do you need to be well?" Nobody's asking that for those questions. They're just like, "I'm going to take this and run because this fits what I need." But Tucker Carlson was not interviewing Kanye when he was standing there after Katrina being like, "George Bush hates Black people." There was no hour of Tucker Carlson asking Kanye about why George Bush is being accused of hating Black people. So when I say it's just about when is this message happening? Why is this message happening? When is this person being given a mic, and when aren't they being given a mic? That's what I'm talking about. But if you feel attacked and you're basic primal level, then you're going to be like, "Yo, Black people hate Jews because I heard it on Tucker Carlson."

Shoshana Brown:

Autumn, you better let these people know, for real, for real. Because what people don't understand is that giving him that mic has an impact. It's not just some random person, it's like me, regular, degular Shoshana going to work in the Bronx, pulling up to work and my regular, degular coworkers being like, "Oh, but Kanye's right though. Jews do own the whole in music industry," or, "Oh, but you don't really understand what he's saying." And so the thing is, again, he's supporting the further enforcement of antisemitism and he's bringing more people into that fold and into those rabbit holes and those dangerous, dangerous algorithms on all these platforms, crunchy to alt-right. It is real easy to fall into those algorithms. So once you think that there's an... And that's how it works. There's always an ounce of truth, there's always an ounce of truth in these things.

And then it gets blown out of proportion. And then you find yourself at the bottom of a rabbit hole, totally radicalized because we have access to all these platforms like Discord and TikTok where white

supremacists and neo-Nazis are actively recruiting. This is not like, "Oh yeah, hahaha, like white supremacists." No, they are organized, they're tactful, they are actively out here recruiting intentionally. So it's real important to understand that, like she said, is not just the platform, it's like what is going on? And that platform leads to actual violence.

Shimon Cohen:

Exactly.

Shoshana Brown:

Because they're out here watching this that are like, "Oh yeah!" And they're the people that are living in states without gun laws that will allow you to get a gun before... They care less about you having a gun than they do about you having a high school diploma. That you can read doesn't matter, but please have a gun. And those people are stockpiling weapons. There are real threats out here as we see in the news almost every day. And I just can't keep saying that enough, because part for me is recognizing I don't want us to be gaslit or to be fooled. And a lot of folks are not paying attention right now to the rise in the threat that we have going on, not only in this country but across the world.

Autumn Leonard:

I want to add on to that two things that I think are really, really important. And also Shimon, I just want to say this is what happens when Black and Jewish meet is Shoshana and I will just talk. You going to have to work to get your questions up in there. It's Jewish people talk and Black girls' talk. And so Black and Jewish girls, we got lots to say. Okay. So the nuance of that is the churches getting shot up, the places of worship being shot up, Jewish places of worship, Black places of worship, the violence is on both of our bodies. So when we're using this to recruit, I'm just going to say Kanye is sexier than whoever's running the Proud Boys. So if you're using it to recruit antisemitic and racist fanatics who will then go and act violently upon our bodies and our safety, Kanye is sexy for that shit. You can be like, "Yeah, be like Kanye." And then you're like, "Oh well then I'm somehow not racist or whatever when I'm out here doing this stuff." It twists it up.

Shoshana Brown:

Exactly. I was going to say that. It's an easy way to be like, "I'm not racist. I'm like Kanye West." Come on.

Autumn Leonard:

Exactly. Exactly. And so that leads to very physical violence. It leads to Tree of Life, it leads to what happened to Black churches and it has those repercussions. And then the second-

Shimon Cohen:

In Buffalo in the supermarket.

Autumn Leonard:

Yes.

Shimon Cohen:

That was a antisemitic white supremacist and the majority of people who were killed were Black.

Autumn Leonard:

Exactly. That's the point that we're making. So the thing about when you look to see who your allies are, when you look to see who benefits, literally you see we are not benefiting as Jews or Black folks from our safety being compromised in these ways. And then the second thing that I was going to say is my bubbe passed away a few years ago. Her family immigrated to this country because of fear of pogroms in the Ukraine. And so she lived in this country through World War I, through the Great Depression, through World War II, all the way up. And she's watching Trump and she is like, "I recognize this rhetoric. This rhetoric leads to the dehumanization and the unsafety, and I have watched this happen before and I don't understand why all Jewish people are not standing up and saying this rhetoric, we know what this leads to."

And so when I think about my guides as a Jewish woman, I think about my bubbe being really clear. I'm listening to my ancestors here as I make these choices about how to be Jewish in the world. And my grandmother was really clear, Trump's rhetoric is rhetoric that we as Jews have heard before and it does not lead to our safety. And it does not lead to democracy or liberation. It leads to fascism and it leads to authoritarianism. And so I'm like, "My grandmother lived through this, yo. She lived through it." On her deathbed she was still like, "I'm cute because I look Swedish." She still had that thing where she didn't want to look Jewish because her body went through when Jews were not seen as White.

And she is saying very clearly, Trump's rhetoric is dangerous for Jews everywhere. And then you see it metastasized, you see it happening in Britain with Brexit. You see it happening in Germany with this potential coup. You even see it happening in India where there are huge Jewish communities, there are huge Jewish communities and that have been there for thousands of years in India with the rise of, I don't know what Modi is and I'm not going to speak more about it because I'm not sure my positional stuff is about that. But I'm going to say it is more authoritarian than it is democratic. And that's the largest democracy in the world.

Shimon Cohen:

And I know we got to wrap up soon, but it is mind boggling to me that in 2022, Kanye West, who I listen... listened, cause I am still trying to figure that part out, to his old stuff that was just phenomenal. And he's praising Hitler. That is mind boggling to me. And I know he is not well, I know he is not well, but there's a lot of people who aren't well with mental health that don't praise Hitler too. But then all these people who are like, "Oh yeah, Hitler was cool with Black people." I can't even believe this stuff I'm seeing. And it's like, are you serious? Seriously, you really think you would've been okay? I don't know what you all are hearing around all that in New York because everything is different in New York.

Autumn Leonard:

It's very different. So we have the Black Jews marching.

Shimon Cohen:

Right, the whole Kyrie goes back to playing, all that, BHI are out. But this whole thing, it's just mind boggling to me. Never in my life would I have thought that people would say Hitler was cool with Black people. That is just totally wild to me. How does it even get to that, that people think that that's true?

Shoshana Brown:

As an educator and a school social worker, working in a high school, I will tell you that that is a direct admonishment of our education system here in the United States. We need to reckon with the core of the issue around antisemitism and around anti-Black racism is the miseducation of our young people

and the allowance of various districts, counties, states, et cetera, being allowed to get away with not actually teaching the facts and not actually having real conversations about history and about teaching people critical thinking. If we were allowed to be critical thinkers and actually had an education, I think we would see a lot less of this.

But public education system, which is in fact very young, has not been education, it has been schooling. And we have been preparing our young people for the workforce or to get out and be productive members of society instead of preparing our young people to be critical thinkers, creative, thoughtful, and actually to contribute to the bettering of our society and planet as a whole. So I think that that's what we're seeing is particularly amongst Kanye, Kyrie and many other Black folks who are falling down this spiral and getting radicalized, is a condemnation of the public education system because you don't think Kanye West went to Chicago public schools?

We have to look at the origins of all of this and how people are taught to think and taught to be in the world. So I have to always get on my soapbox about education.

Autumn Leonard:

More than that, I think the other thing to keep in mind is that, again, we're talking about systems. We're not talking about individual actors. So the system of public education in this country, I'm going to come back to what I said before, maybe I keep saying it, about who benefits. Integration, the vast amount of integration, all of this, the talks and everything that went into integration. Again, I want you to keep in mind that the vast numbers of kids who were in school during that time were White kids. And all of this money, time and effort going into policing Black kids' bodies is taking away from properly educating all the kids, but also the White kids in this country.

Shimon Cohen:

A hundred percent.

Autumn Leonard:

And that also, you see that in what's happening today with the transgender stuff. I'm like, yo, for the amount of airtime that transgender bathrooms in schools gets, to the actual amount of transgender kids in... [ringtone interrupts] Oh and that's my hard out. To the actual amount... And that's my answer to Kanye right now. I also want to just be clear, my heart out to go pick up my kid is like, "We goin' be all right. We goin' be all right." So I don't want to leave y'all with the doom and gloom because Kanye is not the only rapper out there in the world. And I love Kanye. I used to sing like "That which don't kill me, can only make me stronger." And there's like some truth to that. But now I sing, "We goin' be all right," and that's just my choice because I'm looking to who's creating music and future and whatever dreams.

But back to education real quick before I jump out to go pick up my kid from their public school here in New York City, I just want to say that the fact that we are spending all this air time, all this money is pouring into these fights about transgender bathrooms right now and critical race theory, but that money is not pouring into teacher salaries. That money is not pouring into resources. More teachers in schools, less kids. There are schools here in New York City, we have the largest school system in the country that is 30 kids to one teacher in a classroom. How can you learn like that?

We are the largest school system. We are like a million kids are being educated in this school system and the norm is 25 to 30 kids in a classroom and closing, not building. So I want to say my future is building more schools. My future is 15 kids to one teacher. My future is instead of spending millions of dollars on a standardized test to see if my kid is depressed, actually bringing in more social workers like you Shimon, like you Shoshana, into my kid's school. There are solutions that are beautiful, beautiful

liberatory solutions. We are not all doom and gloom. There are other possibilities, but we can't get to that if we are talking about Kanye because I just don't care about that fool no more.

Shoshana Brown:

For real.

Autumn Leonard:

And now I got to go get my kid. Bye.

Shimon Cohen:

Thanks Autumn. Thanks so much. I know you got to go. We're just going to wrap up. I'm going to put some links in the show notes and on the website, so folks can get connected to the work you all are doing and learn more. And this was a great start of this conversation and I hope you all will come back on in the future and we can go deeper and get more into your actual on the ground organizing and what that all looks like. So I just want to thank you both so much for coming on the podcast and for doin' the work.

Shoshana Brown:

Yes. And I really appreciate you having us. Just want to shout out Black Jewish Liberation Collective, blackjewishliberation.org. Check us out on Instagram at BlackJewishLiberation. Check us out on Facebook. We have Kwanzakkah coming up. It's going to be poppin', so make sure you come through and see what's up with the Black Jewish Liberation Collective. Donate. We take reparations and so we are here for the liberation and for doing the good work. So reach out to us. We'd love to be in community.

Autumn Leonard:

Right. Great. There are definitely liberations out there in the world.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you all so much.

Autumn Leonard:

Did I say liberations? I meant reparations? Okay.

Shoshana Brown:

Peace!

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you for listening to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change. I hope you enjoyed the podcast. Please follow on Twitter and leave positive reviews on iTunes. If you're interested in being a guest or know someone who's doing great work, please get in touch. Thank you for doing real work to make this world a better place.