

JEWES AND WHITENESS

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT RACE IN JEWISH SPACES?

OPENING QUESTION:

When asked to identify your race/ethnicity, how do you answer? Why?

ARE JEWS WHITE?

This is an excerpt from an article published by The Jewish Daily Forward. The article was written by Nylah Burton- a Jewish activist and writer.

White Jews aren't white passing. They are functionally white.

"White-passing" implies the need to hide. When someone is white-passing, it often means that their white privilege is limited, and it can be snatched away if their true ethnicity is discovered. For example, a white-passing Latinx person may be deported if their immigration status is revealed. "White-passing" means the privilege is only extended in contexts in which a person is mistaken for white. A white-passing black person may get some privilege due to their appearance, but will still be subject to systemic economic disparities.

But in this country, at this moment in time, those systemic punishments don't always apply to white Jews when people find out that they are Jewish. Most systemic benefits of whiteness will not be taken away from white Ashkenazi Jews who possess them if someone discovers their Jewishness. No doubt, prejudice and anti-Semitism may remain, but their loan rates will stay the same and the police won't be more likely to pull the trigger.

This is what being functionally white means, that someone can and is willing to operate in American society as white, without the fear that their ethnicity will be discovered. They can live in white neighborhoods, have the safety of whiteness, go to white schools, marry white people, and have the economic privilege of whiteness.

This is not to say that being Jewish isn't incredibly dangerous in this country. Anti-Semitic hate crimes make up the vast majority of all hate crimes. But at this point in time in America, anti-Semitism is not comparable to systemic racism. All Jews will be a target of white supremacists, but many Jews may not ever experience racism.

This is because racism is an institutional poison based on skin color, on one's proximity to whiteness, or one's distance from blackness. White supremacy is an extreme ideology that asserts the superiority of Western European Christian whiteness with violence and murder. It can spread like wildfire, but it is rarely coded into every aspect of our lives. Racism is.

Read more: <https://forward.com/opinion/404482/white-jews-stop-calling-yourself-white-passing/>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What distinction does Burton make between racism and Anti-Semitism? Do you agree with her?
- (b) Do you agree that Caucasian Jews are functionally “white” in America?
- (c) Burton writes that racism is coded into every aspect of our lives. In what ways is racism coded into your life?

WHITE ASHKENAZI AWARENESS CHECKLIST¹:

“According to numbers compiled in 2004 by the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, Jews who are African–American, black, Latino, Hispanic, Native American, mixed race, African, South American, Middle Eastern, Caribbean, Asian and Mizrahi make up 20% of Jews in the United States alone.”² This diversity is not always reflected or embraced in our Jewish institutions. To explore how the stereotype equating Jewish identity with White Ashkenazi identity continues to permeate the American Jewish world, we invite you to complete the following checklist.

Take a few minutes to have each member fill out the following checklist. Alternatively, you may ask participants to stand and, as you read each item, ask them to step forward or step back, depending on their response to a particular item on the list.

- Place a check (✓) next to the statements that apply to you.
 - Place a question mark (?) next to it if raises a question for you.
 - Place an exclamation mark (!) to those that surprise you or resonate strongly.
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- At my synagogue, religious school, Jewish Community Center (JCC), or camp I can walk in not be seen as an outsider.
 - At my synagogue, religious school, JCC, or camp I can walk in and not be seen as exotic.
 - At my synagogue, religious school, JCC, or camp I can walk in with my family and not worry that they will be treated unkindly because of the color of their skin.
 - At my synagogue, religious school, JCC, or camp I can walk in and feel that my children are seen as Jews.
 - At my synagogue, religious school, JCC, or camp I can enjoy music that reflects the tunes, prayers, and cultural roots of my specific Jewish heritage.
 - I can easily find books, magazines, and educational materials with images of Jews who look like me.
 - I can easily find Jewish books and toys for my children with images of Jews that look like them.

¹ All of the parts of this checklist were written by Jews of Color and based on their experiences. The original version of this Checklist was developed by Corinne Lightweaver, Sasha King, and members of the Jewish Multiracial Network (2006–2009).

² Read more: <https://forward.com/sisterhood/149516/sh-jews-say-to-non-white-jews/>

CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE – LINDA GORDON SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCUSSION SERIES

- I am not singled out to speak as a representative of an “exotic” Jewish subgroup.
- When I go to Jewish bookstores or restaurants, I am not seen as an outsider.
- I find experiences and images that I can relate to and faces look similar to my family in Jewish newspapers and magazines.
- I do not worry about access to housing or apartments in predominately Jewish neighborhoods.
- My rabbi never questions that I am Jewish.
- When I tell other members of my synagogue, religious school, JCC, or camp that I feel marginalized, they are immediately and appropriately responsive.
- There are other children at the religious school/camp who look like my child.
- My child’s authenticity as a Jew is never questioned by adults or children based on his/her skin color.
- People never say to me, “But you don’t look Jewish,” either seriously or because they thought it was funny.
- I do not worry about being seen or treated as a member of the janitorial staff at a synagogue, school, JCC, or camp or when attending a Jewish event.
- I am never asked “how” I am Jewish at dating events or on Jewish dating websites.
- I can arrange to be in the company of Jews of my heritage most of the time.
- When attempting to join a synagogue or Jewish organization, I am confident that my ethnic background will not be held against me.
- I know my racial or ethnic background will not be held against me if I attempt to join a minyan in prayer.
- I can ask synagogues and Jewish organizations to include images and cultural traditions from my background without being seen as a nuisance.
- I can enroll in a Jewish day school, or historically Jewish college and find Jewish students and professors with my racial or ethnic background.
- People of color do not question why I am Jewish.
- I know my ethnic background will not be a barrier in being called to read the Torah.
- I am not discriminated against in the Israeli aliyah (immigration) process as a Jew of my particular ethnicity.
- I have never had the police called on me or have been escorted out of a service by a police officer while simply praying because of my skin color.
- I have not been asked to leave a synagogue or a class, nor have I been barred from entering a synagogue, class, or Jewish event due to my skin color.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Which statements surprised you and why?
- (b) Which statements resonated strongly and why?
- (c) What could our community do to allow Jews of Color to check off more boxes on this list?

WHAT WISDOM CAN JEWISH TRADITION PROVIDE?

Consider the following story from the Talmud:

Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 20a-20b

Our Rabbis have taught: A person should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar. It happened that Rabbi Eleazar the son of Rabbi Simeon was coming from Migdal Gedor on his donkey, and he was feeling very happy because he had learned a lot of Torah. He passed by a very ugly man who said to him "Peace be upon you." Rabbi Eleazar did not answer. He said: "Good for nothing! How ugly this man is!" Then he asked him, "Are all the people of your city as ugly as you are?" The man said: I do not know, but go and tell the artist who made me, 'How ugly is the vessel which you have made.'" When Rabbi Eleazar realized he had done something wrong, he got down from his donkey and bowed in front of the man and asked for forgiveness. [The man] said to him: "I will not forgive you until you go to the artist that created me and tell him: how ugly is the vessel that you created." Rabbi Eleazar walked behind [the other man] until he reached [the man's] city. When the people who lived in the city came out to meet him and said "Peace be upon you rabbi and teacher," the ugly man asked them "Who are you calling Rabbi?" They replied: 'The man who is walking behind you.' He said to them: 'If this man is a rabbi, may there not be any more like him in Israel!' They asked him: 'Why' He replied: "He did such and such to me." They said to him: "Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a man of great Torah learning." The man replied: 'For your sakes I will forgive him, but only if he does not make a habit of acting this way.' Immediately, Rabbi Eleazar went to the beit midrash (study house) and taught: "A man should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar." And for this reason the reed merited that of it should be made a quill for the writing of the Torah scroll, tefillin and mezuzot.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What are the messages of this Talmud story?
- (b) This story features a rabbi having an immediate negative reaction to another person who looks physically different than he does. Have you been aware of your own negative reactions towards those who look physically different? How do you respond to this?
- (c) This story suggests that we should not be forgiven for treating people poorly who look differently from us unless and until we resolve not to make a habit of the mistreatment. What habits do you (or do we as a community) need to change, when it comes to race?