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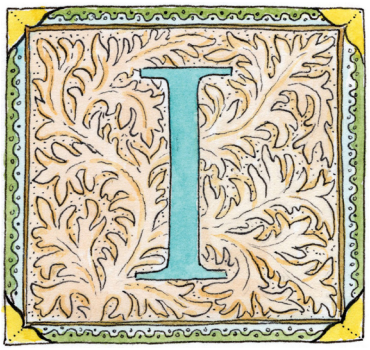
Why I Am Not a Jew of Color

On Jewish peoplehood and resistance to assimilation



IT TOOK ME years to understand why I reacted so strongly to being called a *Jew of color*.

On paper, I seemed a perfect fit for the label: an immigrant from South America with Middle Eastern ancestry, brown skin, an accent, and personal experiences of racialization. I've encountered racial bias in grocery stores and Jewish institutional settings alike.

At first, I thought my discomfort stemmed from the audacity of others assigning me — and many others — a label without seeking our input, all in the name of inclusion. To encounter, as an adult, a term crafted to describe me — yet entirely absent from my own lexicon — felt alienating and even patronizing. It misrepresented the communities I come from, communities that would not have recognized themselves in the term.

Later, I thought my unease stemmed from the label's political connotations. It felt like a term rooted in progressive activism, and while I care deeply about justice, my worldview leans liberal, not progressive. The first time I heard the term, it was accompanied by an analysis of America as systemically racist, its real founding in 1619 rather than 1776. As an immigrant who adores America, warts and all, I couldn't help but feel baffled. Why did so many on the Left view America as uniquely malevolent? *Jew of color* felt less like a description and more like a political statement I had never consented to make.

Over time, I realized that my discomfort ran deeper. It wasn't merely about my lack of consent or my politics; it was about what it means to be a Jew and part of the Jewish people. I know that the term *Jew of color* means different things to different people. For many of my friends, it is an authentic representation of their racial identity or serves as a way to advocate greater sensitivity and awareness of Jewish diversity. At the institutional and activist level, however, the term often functions as a political or ideological identity that inserts America's black-white dichotomy into Jewish communal life. It assigns guilt and innocence within the Jewish community, flattens the rich diversity and complexity of Jewish identity, and undermines the shared bonds that define our peoplehood.

I am wholly committed to fighting racism inside and outside our communities and helping to make every Jew, regardless of skin tone, feel welcome in Jewish spaces. But I distinguish this effort at inclusion from a different political project.

As a non-white Jew, I don't identify as a Jew of color because the term often feels more focused on "white" Jews than on people like me. Specifically, for many, the political project linked to the term *Jews of color* insists on coloring white Jews with the white guilt of American racial discourse.

I think that the internal Jewish debate that took place over the

term (and the associated demographic questions) in 2019 offers a helpful case study for examining how this binary framework emerged in the Jewish community, and what it reveals about the complexity of Jewish identity, peoplehood, and the risks of mimicking America's racial politics.

In 2019, the Jews of Color Field Building Initiative published the *Counting Inconsistencies* report, which delivered two key findings about Jews of color (loosely defined by the researchers as non-white Jews). First, the report argued that previous surveys commissioned by or in coordination with bodies in the organized Jewish community had systematically undercounted Jews of color, often omitting race questions, relying on inconsistent frameworks, or using methods like "common" Jewish last names. Second, it estimated that, based on its corrected methodology, Jews of color in fact constituted 12–15 percent of Jews in the United States, a figure far higher than earlier surveys had suggested.

These two findings reinforced each other, shaping a narrative not just about Jews of color but about the organized Jewish community as a whole. If Jews of color were 12 to 15 percent of American Jewry, then the systemic undercounting in previous studies was proof that the majority-white organized Jewish community was, intentionally or otherwise, beset with systemic racism that had rendered so many Jews of color institutionally invisible.

This account aligned with the origins and evolution of the term *Jews of color* itself, which was originally introduced in 2001 by educator, researcher, and activist Shahanna McKinney-Baldon as "a reminder for some that there are Jews who are Black, Latino/a, Asian, and/or Native." Two decades later, McKinney-Baldon clarified that the original purpose of the term had been not just to "acknowledge

and lift up the racial and ethnic diversity in our communities" but also to find "ways to end the exclusion [that Jews of color] experience as racial and ethnic minorities within U.S. Jewish spaces." For McKinney-Baldon, *Jews of color* was not merely a descriptive label for non-white Jews but a political tool designed to diagnose and address exclusion and discrimination in Jewish institutions. Using the term could be, in her words, a "political act."

For many leaders publicly associated with this term, *Jews of color* was as much a political category as it was a term of racial or ethnic identity, one that couldn't be separated from the critique of systemic power dynamics and racial exclusion inside the majority-white Jewish establishment.

Many dark-skinned Jews like myself read the report and discovered, to our surprise, that not only were we classified as Jews of color (or JOCs), but that we made up a far larger fraction of the American Jewish community than previously thought. "Statistically speaking, every minyan in America includes at least one person of color" became a frequently quoted line.

The percentage seemed implausibly high to me, a scholar of Sephardic Jews in the United States. And the term was foreign to my own personal experience as a Sephardic Latina of North African and Middle Eastern descent. At the same time, I acknowledged that my perspective was personal. The term might still reflect the experiences of others in ways I hadn't considered and didn't know.

Attending a presentation of the report at a mainstream Jewish institution, I was profoundly moved by the painful stories shared by many fellow attendees, particularly black Jews, who described facing clear exclusion and being made to feel unwelcome in Jewish spaces. A Jewish grandmother spoke with emotion about the discrimination her biracial grandchildren had endured. The report had unearthed deep communal pain.

I left the presentation conflicted. On the one hand, I realized how much I hadn't known about the experiences of those Jews who frequently endure racial bias and exclusion in our Jewish community. On the other hand, I remained skeptical of the accuracy of the 12–15 percent statistic and its use as evidence of systemic racism within the organized Jewish community.

The more I learned about how the estimate had been calculated, the more skeptical I became. It counted not only Jews who identified with categories other than white, such as black, Asian, American Indian, and Hispanic (including those who identified as both Hispanic and white). It also folded in any Jew who selected "other," those who identified with multiple groups, and those who identified with no group — almost certainly capturing white-presenting Jews of purely European descent who for any reason did not identify as white. While using such a broad umbrella might make the 12–15 percent estimate more plausible, it undermined the sweeping accusations of systemic racism often tied to it.

Had the conversation about the report and its estimates allowed for a diversity of perspectives, it might have proven valuable for addressing racism within the Jewish community and for raising awareness about its diversity.

But the discourse quickly transformed into something different: a litmus test. To agree with the report's estimates and accompanying diagnosis was to align with antiracism; to question them was to be complicit in perpetuating racism within Jewish communities.

This transformation into a litmus test became clear when two demographers, Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, wrote an article in *eJewishPhilanthropy* questioning the methodology and

categories used in the study. Their critique flagged significant methodological flaws, such as the use of local figures to stretch national estimates without recognizing that the national estimates had already incorporated state-level data, and questioned the overly broad "Jews of color" category. Their conclusion defended the integrity of prior research — some of it conducted by them — and argued that, although the percentage of Jews of color was very likely to increase in the near future, the current percentage of such Jews probably aligned closely with the 6 percent estimated in 2013 by the Pew Research Center. While they acknowledged the critical importance of inclusion, they maintained that it should not come at the expense of rigorous and reliable data. (Their prediction of an increase was borne out in a 2020 Pew report finding that 8 percent of American Jews identify as non-white or Hispanic.)

I agreed with their main points but read their op-ed with mounting unease. They seemed to misjudge the stakes of the conversation, approaching it with neither the sensitivity it demanded nor the ability to defuse its tensions. They missed the political and emotional — dare I say "intersectional" — subtext of the report. The flurry of responses to their article made it clear: Questioning the estimates, as Sheskin and Dashefsky had done, was tantamount to perpetuating harm. *You may not have intended to be racist toward Jews of color, but you are*. Rabbi Rick Jacobs and Chris Harrison of the Union for Reform Judaism went so far as to characterize such criticism of the estimates as akin to "an act of white supremacist violence."

Reading these reactions, I felt a knot in my stomach. As a non-white Jew apprehensive about the way this report defined and then estimated "Jews of color," I realized that questioning this on even factual analytical grounds would be seen as, like using the term *JOC*, a political act and that it risked the racist label.

As a sociologist of Jews, I considered this litmus test a mark of academic malpractice, a weaponization of research, however well-intentioned. I drafted an op-ed arguing that interrogation of the report's estimates should not be interpreted as racist. Perhaps, I thought, my identity as a brown Jew would shield me from the accusation of racism. This was on May 23, 2020. On May 25, George Floyd was murdered. At the advice of colleagues, I shelved the draft and chose silence.

The timing was coincidental, but the conceptual confluence was not. The debate over JOC numbers was silenced by the same forces that compelled a homogenizing discourse in America about racial justice, and with similar implications. By 2022, I found myself on a Jewish diversity panel — chosen as the "balanced" voice: diverse, scholarly, critical but not overly controversial — as a black Jewish panelist passionately declared that "20 percent of American Jews look like me." Most nodded in agreement.

Later, a friend asked why I hadn't challenged the claim — which was even higher than the 12–15 percent of the much discussed report. I mumbled something about meeting the audience where they were. The truth was, even as a non-white Jewish scholar, I feared that my purely factual correction would be politically unwelcome.

In retrospect, I think that this controversy reflected a deeper crisis: the shifting political narrative of American Jewry.

In 1973, Milton Himmelfarb famously quipped, "Jews earn like Episcopalians but vote like Puerto Ricans." Himmelfarb's observation was both factually sound and a mark of pride for many American Jews. It reflected a community that had achieved socioeconomic success while remaining committed to the most vulnerable.

American Jewish exceptionalism wasn't just about America being good to Jews — it was about Jews being good to other Americans.

But over time Himmelfarb's observation began to be transformed by the Left as an acute indictment of the Jewish bourgeoisie. By earning as they did but voting Democrat, liberal Jews might pat themselves on the back even as they upheld economic policies that left black Americans and others behind.

This perspective was one I heard frequently when, years ago, I conducted research interviews with black and Jewish civic leaders in New York. Black leaders repeated that Jews were charitable and loyal Democratic voters. But they also faulted Jews for resisting deeper policy changes for wealth redistribution. In this telling, Jews were reliable partners for running food pantries but less so when it came to building affordable housing in suburban, upper-middle-class neighborhoods.

This challenge to the Jewish self-perception of having both "made it" in America while simultaneously aligning wholly with the underserved echoes a claim from one of the earliest academic works on Jews and whiteness. Karen Brodkin's 1998 book *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* disputed the self-congratulatory narrative prevalent among Jews in the United States. She argued that Jewish success in America wasn't just about hard work but about access to resources such as GI Bill benefits and being allowed to purchase homes in good neighborhoods — opportunities that were structurally denied to black Americans. She insisted that Jewish assimilation in postwar America was an assimilation into whiteness and indicated that some of the ways in which this was done directly hurt black Americans.

Once a novel critique of American Jewish exceptionalism, this perspective became increasingly influential. This explains why the 2019 JOC estimates went largely unquestioned in white Jewish spaces.

Accepting the numbers was a way of acknowledging our failure as American Jews to examine race critically — including our participation in systems that perpetuated black socioeconomic disadvantage. This was Jewish guilt, amplified by whiteness to form white Jewish guilt.

The legitimate critique of Jewish America's negotiation of whiteness and class soon morphed into an ideological narrative: White Jews were as complicit as, or even more guilty than, other white Americans.

The fundamental problem with this ideological narrative is that it requires a revisionist uprooting of history. A semi-recent and striking example of this was the omission of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel from the 2014 film *Selma*. Many supporters of the ideological narrative saw this omission as a corrective to the old narrative of Jewish self-importance and self-righteousness. But it was the opposite of historical correctness. Heschel had in fact been at Selma, in the front line. The photograph of him marching with King is one of the best-known of the civil rights era. Removing him from the scene was, rather than a historical corrective, a political act done in the service of protecting the revisionist ideological narrative that runs counter to the historical facts.

At a panel on Jews and race, I heard speakers mock those — including Dartmouth professor Susannah Heschel, Rabbi Heschel's daughter — who expressed frustration over her father's exclusion. "How self-absorbed can Jews be," they laughed, "to focus on Heschel in a movie about Selma?" The speakers missed the point. It is not self-absorption to insist on truth, or at least to reject falsehoods. They seemed not to realize that they and the filmmakers were participating in a historical transplant operation, transmuting America's racial political drama into the Jewish community, as though the latter were simply a separate but equal stage of that drama.

Something closer to the opposite is true. Jews brought their global and historical experience of suffering to America's racial drama. Statistics on the overrepresentation of white Jews in the civil rights move-

ment and among the white Freedom Riders, for instance, are a matter of scholarly consensus. The goal of these white Jews was for the epic of American Jewish success to be repeated in the black community.

What the revisionist narrative did was to suggest, less than a generation after Auschwitz and the uprooting of Jews from Muslim lands, not only that the history of anti-Jewishness was over, but that it also didn't matter to understand the American Jewish experience. In effect, Jews might have been the Other elsewhere, but in America, they were part of the power elite, regardless of their actual experience, history, or actions on behalf of other Others.

The reason for all this socio-historical political gymnastics is simple. Jews, as a social, historical, political, and religious category, defy America's simplistic identity-politics binaries. Historically, Jews have been persecuted by Christians and Muslims, capitalists and Marxists, the aristocracy and the peasantry, the wealthy and the poor. In America, Jews, the majority of whom read as white, are the most frequent targets of religious hate crimes—accused by Christian nationalists, the Nation of Islam, and Black Hebrew Israelites of the same nonsensical cosmic crime: being *fake* Jews. This not long after 6 million were systematically murdered in Europe for being *real* Jews. Add to this the fact that white nationalists accuse white Jews of being *fake* whites.

The fact is that Jews are inconveniently complex for the stories that America (and not only America) tells about itself. Jewish history disrupts simplistic frameworks of race and power to such a degree that it requires ideological contortion. Jews had to be forcibly assimilated into "whiteness" as a moral and political category to make them fit into America's racial story. That project involved the erasure of key elements of Jewish history.

This erasure has found near-explicit expression in the words of Linda Sarsour, famous for her anti-Israel activism and once hailed as the "new face of intersectional feminism." Sarsour was invited to address a "Jews of color" gathering before participating in a panel on antisemitism at the New School for Social Research. In a video published by Jewish Voice for Peace, she stated:

> I want to make the distinction that while antisemitism is something that impacts Jewish Americans, it's different than anti-black racism or Islamophobia because it's not systemic. . . . Of course, you may experience vandalism or an attack on a synagogue, or maybe on an individual level. . . . But it's not systemic, and we need to make that distinction.

This attempt to distinguish antisemitism from other forms of bigotry for being less systemic is exactly how systemic antisemitism operates. The assimilation of Jews into white American history erases the essence of Jewish history. I've experienced it firsthand. In one interfaith conversation, I objected to focusing exclusively on Islamophobia while ignoring antisemitism. A white Jewish friend chastised me, accusing me of centering Jewish suffering to deflect from Jewish privilege. This framing remakes Jewish suffering into its own sin, simply a mask to avoid white privilege. White Jews thereby stand doubly accused, profiting off of claiming victimhood while victimizing others in the process. Again, it is as though the timeless story of anti-Jewish hatred is over or never really happened.

This is what I mean when I say that, early on, I sensed that for many of its proponents the term *Jews of color* had more to do with

white Jews than it had to do with me. Their construction of "Jews of color" as a political category reinforced the revisionist narrative construction of "white Jews" as a political category. It framed "white" or "Ashkenazi" as pejoratives, erasing the shared ancient Middle Eastern roots of Jewishness and assimilating Ashkenazi Jews into the culpability of whiteness. It was an attempt to trigger in white Jews a historical amnesia and to make them see themselves as privileged white Americans who happen to be Jewish.

The organized Jewish community's acceptance of the inflated statistics in the 2019 report and the resistance to any questioning of the estimates revealed that many in our community had internalized the revisionist narrative. But this whole unfortunate ordeal was also a manifestation of Jewish distinctiveness. The reason it struck a nerve in the organized Jewish community is precisely that American Jews have never fit neatly inside America's defining identity discourse: race.

Like many American Jewish liberals, I have long found some truth in the intersectional analysis of race and class. But not in the ideological and activist claims that often attend it: that merit is an illusion, systemic racism is omnipresent, and race is the primary determinant of power and oppression in America. I find the suggestion that my skin pigment makes me more oppressed than a poor white man from rural America with no high school diploma to be morally perverse.

None of this lessens my commitment to the urgent work of fighting racism and bias inside and outside our communities. Recently, I met a young black Jew who shared how awful it's been to walk into synagogues and be repeatedly asked whether he belongs. I was furious that this still happens. It is a desecration of our covenant. Our dispersions have for millennia made us what we might now call a multiracial and multiethnic people. Our covenant reminds us that every Jew belongs, every Jew matters, and that our vision for a better

world must include the fight to make this a reality. But we must reject falsehoods and the distortion of our Jewish stories. This cannot be the path to a better world.

Many of our conversations about Jews of color relied on two false assumptions. First, that racial oppression in the Jewish community was a scale model of that in the broader world. Second, that accentuating racial differences within the Jewish community would be the means for strengthening it.

In fact, importing American racial politics into the Jewish community manufactured the tensions and distortions we saw play out in 2019. Rather than "lifting up the racial and ethnic diversity in our communities" — which McKinney-Baldon, in an article in 2020, described as her original intent — it sowed greater division.

In that same article, McKinney-Baldon quoted Africana scholar Wade W. Nobles on why the act of self-naming is so politically important. The act affirms our "being family and being awesome in a hostile, toxic… reality." If there is something we Jews can learn from this episode, it is the necessity of Jewish inclusion for exactly that reason. We have to remember and remind others that our Jewish family is diverse ethnically, racially, socially, politically, economically, professionally, and in every other way you can name or self-name.

I once spoke with my father, a Sephardic rabbi, about a clear instance of discrimination he faced in an Ashkenazi network. Jokingly, I said, "Let's write an op-ed about Ashkenormativity and racism for a liberal news outlet. It'll go viral and fix this immediately." My father, whose brown skin reflects his Argentinian and Syrian roots, turned pale. "You want me to betray my Jewish brothers and sisters in public?" ✳